

## Role Reversal by inazuma\_hunter

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** M/M

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler (brief), Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

Mike has always been there to save Will, no matter what the circumstances. That may be part of the reason that Will has developed a secret crush on his longtime and presumably straight best friend. But when Mike goes missing one summer afternoon, will Will have the courage to step up and be the one to save Mike this time?

# 1. Chapter 1

## Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, this is my first fic posted on this site, and my first real multi-chapter fic posted anywhere, so I'm a bit nervous. Please message me if you notice any mistakes. I love Byler with all my heart, and am hoping for it to become canon in S3. Here's some things to know for this fic:

Joyce and Hopper are married, making Will and Eleven step-siblings.

The characters are aged up slightly, summer after freshman year of high school.

Mileven is not going to last very long at all, so if you're here for that tag, I don't want to click bait you.

Okay, I think that's it. Enjoy!

*Will Byers looked around frantically, his breath heaving in his chest. His surroundings were familiar, but not. Everything around him was tinged in a drab, blue color, little pieces of matter floating lazily through the air, and it was cold. It was so cold.*

*"This can't be happening, not again," he thought to himself. "I have to be dreaming." But everything felt so real. He could feel the chill seeping into his bones. It had to be real - he was back in the Upside Down yet again. He tried to calm down and remember how he had gotten there, but he couldn't. One thing he did know though was that he couldn't stay out in the open on the main street of town, he'd be found there for sure. He ducked behind a building and took careful note of his surroundings. He listened to the all too familiar call of the demodogs coming from behind him. They were close.*

*That made his decision all the easier as he made his way in the opposite direction, looking for a safe haven. Just survive, he told himself. Run and hide and wait for someone to save you. That's what you do best anyways. The brown-haired boy suddenly came to a halt, wondering when the sky*

*had become so red in front of him. And then there it was - the Mind Flayer. Will knew that it had seen him...it had probably seen him all along and lured him this way on purpose. He cursed under his breath and took a step backwards only to hear a chorus of fierce growls. He whirled around to see the pack of demodogs was right in his way, barring his path.*

*"No..." was all Will had time to choke out before they were on him, knocking him to the ground, ripping and tearing and his arms and legs, pinning him down. It hurt so much, the pain was almost unbearable. "Please...someone help!" he screamed weakly. But his only answer was the shadow monster approaching, preparing to enter his body and take over once more. "No anything but that...please! Mom....Jonathan....MIIIIKE!!!"*

Will sat straight up in his bed, sweat pouring down his face. He struggled to return his breathing to normal as he checked his extremities for wounds and found none. He was fine, it had all been a dream. There was a sudden stirring next to him, as a familiar head of tousled hair and a pair of tired eyes met his gaze. "Will, is everything okay?" Mike asked, sitting up.

Will blushed a bit as the blanket fell from his boyfriend's shoulders exposing his torso. Mike always slept shirtless, which was more than okay with Will. He felt a bit guilty though for waking him up. This had happened time and time again. But Mike was always so understanding.

"I had a nightmare," Will began slowly. "I was trapped -"

"In the Upside Down?" Mike broke in, sounding wholly unimpressed. Will looked up in shock to meet his eyes and found not the comforting understanding that was always there, but disinterest and frustration. "And let me guess, the demodogs were there? And the maybe mind flayer?"

"M-mike? What...what are you -"

"I'm sorry Will, but it's the same thing every time. It's been years now and you're still not over this?"

"I'm trying! It's not easy to just -" Will cut himself off this time as

Mike shuffled out of the bed and rummaged around for his shirt. "Mike, where are you going?"

"I think I've been more than patient Will. But I can't do this anymore. You know, I took a huge risk agreeing to be your boyfriend. This town isn't nice to gay people Will, as you well know. But I don't have to be like this. I like girls too. I can go have a normal relationship....a normal life."

Will could already feel the tears streaming down his face as his worst fears were coming to pass. He tried to choke out a response, but Mike continued before he could.

"I agreed to be with you because I knew you needed me, I knew you were broken. But I thought that would be temporary you know? That you could be fixed? I didn't think I'd still be stuck with a damaged boyfriend all these years later."

Will wanted to be angry, to shout back that Mike didn't understand, that if this was how he felt then to go ahead and leave. That he didn't want to be anyone's burden. But the thought of Mike leaving was more than he could bear, so he only managed, "I'm sorry! Mike, I'm so sorry, I'll stop. I mean, I've been trying, but I'll try harder. I won't bother you with it anymore...just...please don't leave me. I...I love you."

Mike was fully dressed at this point, and looked down at Will with pity. "I know. And I'm sorry Will...I hope you find someone that can fix you...but that just can't be me. Not anymore."

"Mike...please," Will cried after his retreating form as it disappeared through his door. "Mike....Mike! MIIIIIIKE!!!!"

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When Will woke up again, this time for real, he was in his bed - alone. Of course he was, there was no reality in which Mike Wheeler would actually be his boyfriend. Mike didn't even like guys in that way, and even if he did, he'd never settle for Will. Mike was just a good friend...Will's best friend. But anything more than that was just a dream - no matter how much Will wished otherwise.

"Fuck," he muttered as he sat up slowly. That dream within a dream thing was definitely new. He had had both dreams separately before, but never intertwined like that. Will sighed and glanced at his clock - 12:00 p.m. Despite the shitty awakening, he had actually slept a decent amount of time. He used to love sleeping in on summer days like these before everything happened. The Upside Down, the shadow monster. In fact, he still did love sleeping in, it was just harder for him to do nowadays. He grimaced at his sweat drenched shirt and decided to get up and shower; perhaps some of the memories of those nightmares would get washed away too.

It was an uncharacteristically cool afternoon for late August in Hawkins, Indiana. Will simply took it to mean the end of summer was here, and school would be starting back up again soon. After his shower, he went and sat on the couch in the Byers' living room, just thinking. It was Sunday, and the house was quiet as both Joyce and Hopper were at work for a couple of hours. Eleven was there, but she was in her room (Jonathan's old room), so that left Will with time to himself. The television was on, but he really wasn't watching it. His mind had wandered, as it does so often these days, to his best friend, Mike Wheeler.

It had been somewhat of a slow burn when the feelings started. Before his trip to the Upside Down, he had known that there was something different about how he felt for Mike than he did for the rest of his friends. But back then he had just chalked it up to Mike being his *best* friend. Now, years later, after the events of the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer, when he had finally had time to just be Will again, those feelings had developed into something more tangible. He knew now that he liked Mike more than he should. It was more than best friend feelings.

He had tried to push them away, get rid of them, but every time he thought he was close to succeeding, Mike would do something that was just so....*Mike*. And Will would fall for him all over again. He knew he was fucked. He was in love with his step-sister's boyfriend, and there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing except smile and bear it in front of everyone, and sob into his pillow at night in solitude. That's how it was, and that's how it had to be. He had made his peace with it. Happiness just wasn't for people like him.

A sharp rapping at the door thankfully drew him out from his thoughts. He frowned as he got up and walked towards the door. He was pretty sure they weren't expecting any company. His breath caught in his throat as he opened the door to find the very object of his thoughts standing there before him. Mike Wheeler, with his dark curly hair and soulful brown eyes. The freckles had lightened considerably over the years, but they were still there if you looked closely, lightly dusting his nose and the areas under his eyes. All of this was taken in by Will in a second, but he immediately dismissed it because Mike looked so sad. It only lingered for a moment though, as though he hadn't expected the door to be opened so suddenly, and it was quickly replaced with a smile.

"Oh, hey Will," he said, seemingly surprised, which was weird considering he was at Will's house.

"Hey Mike, what's up? I didn't know you were coming over," Will replied, stepping aside so Mike could come in. Of course Will would never mind seeing Mike, even if it were just for an instant.

The raven-haired boy scratched the back of his head awkwardly as he walked in. The movement caused his unzipped jacket to open up, letting Will catch a glance of Mike's trademark necklace hanging in its usual place around his neck. It was a sturdy chain with a Triforce from the Legend of Zelda hanging from it. Will had given it to him two years ago for his thirteenth birthday. He and Mike had seen it at the store, and Mike had gone on and on about how cool it was. Will had determined right then to get it for him for his birthday, but even a year's worth of Will's paltry allowance wouldn't have done it, so he had spent the better part of two months walking dogs, mowing lawns, and babysitting to earn enough cash.

The gift had drawn a few surprised looks from the Party, and a reluctance from Mike who said he couldn't accept anything so spendy. But Will told him he wanted to thank him for everything he had done for him during the Mind Flayer incident, and downplayed the price by saying he had gotten a good deal on it, so Mike finally agreed to take it, pledging to wear it every day. Back then Will had just been beginning to get a grip on his feelings for his best friend, and even foolishly had some hope that Mike might like him back someday.

"Um, yeah," Mike said, snapping him back to attention. "I kinda was in the neighborhood and was hoping to see El. Is she in?"

Will sighed internally. Of course he was here to see his girlfriend, duh Will. "Yeah, sure, she's back in her room," he replied, forcing a smile to his face. Mike mumbled his thanks and went on back. Will heard El's door close behind him as he sat back down on the couch, trying not to think of what they were doing back there. It didn't seem to be anything of *that* nature though, as he could hear constant but quiet conversation coming from the room. He couldn't make out any of the words, but the whole tone sounded kind of somber. There wasn't much time to contemplate it though, as Mike and El strode out together ten minutes later. Will tried his best to plaster a smile on his face as he addressed them.

"You guys off somewhere?"

"No, um, just me. My mom is expecting me home," Mike answered a bit awkwardly. His face brightened with his next sentence though. "You're still coming over Saturday right? I've been planning this campaign for awhile, I think it's one of my best."

Mike had been talking up this D&D campaign for weeks, planning out an all day campaign/sleepover for Saturday. Will had been kind of avoiding sleepovers with Mike, so part of him thought that Mike had done this for his benefit, but he had nonetheless agreed. "Sure thing Mike, I'll be there."

"Awesome, see you then Will." Mike then turned to Eleven and Will cringed, waiting for the inevitable goodbye kiss. Instead all that happened was an awkward hug, and something mumbled in her ear, and Mike was out the door.

Eleven quietly came and sat down next to Will, not saying anything. He let the silence linger for about 30 seconds, before speaking. "What the hell was that?"

"What the hell was what?" El replied, fixing her face in a confused expression. Will wasn't buying it though.

"Mike just shows up unannounced, you guys talk for like ten minutes,

and then he leaves just like that, with only an awkward goodbye hug? Seriously? Come on, what's up?"

"You know...you're pretty observant Will. About some things at least," she said, letting out a small sigh. "You're right though - Mike and I broke up."

"WHAT!? HE BROKE UP WITH YOU!?" Will exploded angrily, jumping off the couch. He looked ready to chase Mike down and give him a piece of his mind. Because no matter how much he desired Mike for himself, he would not stand by and watch Eleven be hurt. A hand around his wrist gently pulled him back down though.

"No Will, he didn't dump me. It was mutual. " A sad small grin appeared on her face. "Thanks for being so upset for me though."

"I....I don't understand El. You don't seem upset enough."

"I guess....I guess I've kind of felt this coming for months. We both have. It's not that we don't love each other anymore, because we do. We always will. We just...don't love each other in that way anymore. But we agreed we're still friends...and that's what is most important to me."

This is why Will loved Eleven so much, why he could never find it in himself to actually be jealous of her. She was just so...good. So pure. He opened up his arms and his step-sister wordlessly tumbled into them. "Well I'm still sorry," he whispered, hugging her tightly.

She sniffled a bit, allowing herself to sink into Will for a moment before replying. "Well you know, while it is a little sad for me, that just means it's someone else's lucky day."

"I'm afraid I don't follow," Will frowned.

"Well Mike Wheeler is a free man now. There's probably going to be a lot of girls after him when they find out he's available."

Will said nothing aloud, lest his voice betray him, simply humming in agreement. She was right though, he thought wistfully. Mike had grown from a dorky middle schooler into quite the heartthrob. Will had loved both versions of course, because his love for Mike wasn't



about looks (well, not entirely), but now Mike would undoubtedly have his choice of suitors at school.

"So," she continued, "if I were a certain someone that had interest in him, and also had the advantage of finding out he was single before anyone else, I might try to act on that quickly."

Will nearly choked on his own spit. He couldn't see El's face how they were currently situated, but he could swear he heard a hint of a smile on her voice. He tried to compose himself before answering. That had been quite a pointed statement, but maybe she didn't know for sure.

"Wh-what are you talking about, El?"

Well shit, that wasn't smooth. He could practically feel his own voice trembling in the question. El simply snorted before sitting up and disentangling herself so she could look Will in his steadily reddening face. "Look, you're not the only one that's observant, okay? I've seen it. Your face lights up so bright whenever Mike talks to you, you stare at him all the time when you think he's not watching, and you blush any time there's physical contact between the two of you."

"Th-that's....that's..." Will took one look at her face and sighed, knowing it was pointless to lie to her any further. "Fuck. Am I that obvious?"

El crinkled her nose up and grinned, clearly pleased about being right. "I don't think anyone else noticed. I'm pretty sure Mike didn't, he would've said something."

"Shit...shit. El, I-I'm sorry. So, so sorry. I didn't mean to, it's just always kinda been there, even before we met you. I tried to stop, really, but -"

"I don't understand Will. Why are you apologizing?"

"Uh, the whole me having a crush on your boyfriend thing is just....well, it isn't good. And I'm sorry -"

Will was cut off as El took his hand in both of hers. "You can't help who you like, Will," she said with a gentle smile. "And it's not like you ever acted on it or did anything inappropriate. You've been the

perfect brother to me, and a great friend to Mike. You guys have been best friends for forever; I think you'd be great together. And if there was someone that I wouldn't be upset seeing with Mike, it's you."

A prickly sensation behind Will's eyes began to build up as he fought to stave off the tears. "You're amazing, you know that? That you would say that to me while going through this yourself....just...thank you, El."

She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before giggling. "Okay, enough with the mushy stuff...what will you do? Will you go for it?"

"Look, El, it's not that easy. I'm a boy. We're not supposed to like other boys."

"Who said?" El asked, brows knit in confusion.

"A lot of people okay? That's just the way it is."

El sniffed, clearly unimpressed. "That seems like a lame excuse to me. Not doing something because of what someone else might think. I mean, you like him right? Like a lot?"

Will felt his cheeks heat up as he nodded, still not wanting to voice it out loud.

"Then you have to at least try Will. I can tell you from experience he's pretty much the perfect boyfriend. Kind, sweet, attentive, and always a gentleman in the romance department, never pushy or aggressive. Plus," she said, waggling her eyebrows seductively, "he's got a huge -"

"EL!!" Will shrieked.

"-heart. A huge heart," El finished innocently, a blank look on her face. "What's wrong Will, what did you think I was going to -" she broke off with a fake gasp of indignation. "William Byers! Was your mind in the gutter? Shame on you."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Will replied, shaking his head and trying to get his breathing back under control. Just as he thought he was successful though...

"That part of him is pretty big too though," El said impishly.

"ELEVEN!"

"Eleven? No Will, not that big, that'd be ridiculous."

Will stared at his sister wordlessly as she sat there, completely straight-faced. The staring contest lasted about five seconds before she broke with a snort and began to laugh. Will quickly followed suit, shaking his head, until they had both devolved into a fit of giggles.

"I just can't with you anymore," Will said, shaking his head jokingly. He knew she had really only done that to dispel the tension in the room - and it had worked. It felt much lighter than it had just a few minutes ago.

"So...all joking aside," she said finally composing herself. "You're gonna try right?"

"I...I don't know if I can. I mean, not right now. He probably needs some time, he just broke up with a long-term girlfriend you know? I don't wanna barge right in there and try to be some rebound guy."

If Will had thought those excuses would work on El, he was mistaken. "Well, we can't wait too long, school starts up in a couple of weeks, and then you'll have competition." She pursed her lips in thought before a smile came to her face. "How about at your guy's campaign Saturday? You can wait until everyone else is asleep. You two are always up the latest right? Mike will have had about a week to decompress, everything will be perfect. What do you say, Will? Please?"

The boy still didn't know how Eleven was being so cool about all of this, but something in her eyes made it too hard to say no. "Okay, I'll do it," he sighed. "I just hope it doesn't ruin everything."

"I think we both know Mike better than that. Even if he says no, you will still be friends. I know it," El smiled.

Will smiled back, but inside was a bundle of nerves, wishing that he felt as confident as El sounded.

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It was several hours later when the Byers-Hopper clan were sat around the table for dinner. Joyce had brought back some KFC on her way home from work. Will and El had silently agreed not to mention anything about the breakup. Their parents would find out eventually, but it could wait at least a couple of days. Hop was in the middle of a story about something that had happened at the station when the phone rang. Hopper grabbed it and listened. "No, Karen, he's not here." His face rapidly turned into a frown before he turned to the teens at the table.

"Hey you guys, was Mike around here today?"

They exchanged a look, but the tone of Hopper's voice told them this was serious. "Yes, he was here for about ten minutes at around 1:00. He stopped by to talk, but he left right away after that," El answered honestly.

"Did he say where he was going?"

"He said he was going home," Will piped in, his stomach suddenly turning. "He said his mom was expecting him."

Hopper relayed the information to Mrs. Wheeler on the phone. "Yes...yes I understand...I'll get on it right away."

"Jim...is everything okay?" Joyce asked, fearing the worst.

"That was Karen Wheeler," Hopper replied with a sigh. "It seems that Mike is missing."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I have most of this fic written already, just doing some final editing. Next chapter will probably be out in about a week. Comments and kudos are definitely appreciated

## 2. Chapter 2

### Notes for the Chapter:

Yo, I'm back!!! Thanks for all the kudos and positive comments on the last chapter, they really mean a lot to me. Hope you enjoy!

"What do you mean he's missing!?" Will exploded.

"Look, there's no reason to panic yet, but it appears Mike never made it home after leaving here. But he might've stopped off somewhere and lost track of time," Hopper said, his worried face betraying his words.

"That was five hours ago!" Will exclaimed. "Mike wouldn't just disappear like that without telling anyone. Not after everything we've all gone through!"

"Will, honey -" Joyce started, but Will was already up.

"We have to go look for him, all of us."

"Sit *down*, Will!" Hopper said, his voice suddenly commanding the situation. Will sank back down into his chair sullenly. Hopper grew a bit softer with the next sentence. "Just calm down a minute here. The last thing we need is you going missing too. And before you say anything, yes, I'm going to let you guys help look, because I know the only way to stop you would be to literally put you in a cell at the jail. And even that might not be enough. But it's going to be on my terms, are we clear?"

Will and Eleven both nodded silently, and Hopper grunted his approval as he picked up the phone to dial the station.

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It only took about thirty minutes for Hop to get everything organized. They had about twenty people in the search party, including Will, Eleven, Lucas, Max, and Dustin. Hop sent everyone else out to their search zones before gathering the children. "Alright listen, these are

the rules. None of you are to go ANYWHERE alone. Dustin, Max, Lucas, you three have this area," he said, pointing out a square on the map. "Will, Eleven, you two have this one. I'm letting you guys only have two in your group because Eleven has powers. But you're still gonna check in every thirty minutes on the walkies I gave you. And we're all meeting back here at the house when it gets dark. No matter what. Agreed?"

The five of them nodded eagerly, and set out to their respective search grids. Hopper had given them the areas in the woods closest to the Byers house, probably so he could keep them nearby. Will didn't mind though, because Mike had disappeared around here anyways, so he might still be close. Dustin, Lucas, and Max branched off to their own zone leaving him and Eleven alone as they systematically scouted around each tree. Will knew that their current course would eventually take them to Castle Byers, and held out some slim hope that Mike would be there for some reason.

Eleven had been unusually quiet, which Will just chalked up to the stressful circumstances, but normally in a situation like this, she would be the optimistic one. The one saying that everything was going to be okay. But the way her face looked right now, it seemed like she didn't think that at all.

"Hey," he said gently, elbowing her a bit as they walked. "We're gonna find him. You know that right? He's strong, he's a fighter. He'll be alright."

"Of course," she replied, flashing a small smile that was anything but genuine. "We'll find him."

She moved off a little bit ahead of him, effectively ending the conversation, leaving Will feeling worse instead of better. That feeling only intensified when they reached Castle Byers and found it deserted. Will kept staring at the empty haven, as if that would make Mike suddenly appear, but it didn't. As the hours passed, and the check-ins with Hopper came and went with no news, Will started to get more and more distraught. Darkness had closed in by the time the pair had cleared their appointed area and returned to the Byers house. The rest of the Party was waiting for them there, with similarly dejected looks on their faces. It was obvious no one had

found anything, but Will still heard himself voicing the question aloud.

"Nothing," Dustin confirmed sadly. "No sign of him anywhere."

The gloom just sat there settling over everyone until Hopper spoke up. "Look, there's nothing else we can do tonight. Everyone go home and get some rest, and we'll start again in the morning at first light."

"But...Mike is still out there! We can't just go home and sleep in our nice, warm beds while he could be laying hurt somewhere," Will snapped angrily.

"Listen kid, you agreed to the rules. I can't risk more of you guys getting lost. And looking around in the dark is useless, we could miss clues that way. That would just delay us in finding him. Now either you play by my rules or you don't play at all. That was the deal."

The two engaged in a fierce stare down, with even Will surprised at how long he held out before he broke. All the emotion he had been holding in since he found out Mike was missing, all the negative thoughts he had held at bay, they all seemed to gush out all at once as he collapsed sobbing into Hopper's arms. He could hear his friends behind him beginning to snifle as well as they joined the embrace. "We're gonna find him," Hopper assured him, rubbing circles into his back. "We just have to be sharp in order to do it, okay?"

At a loss for words, all Will Byers could do was nod miserably into the sheriff's broad chest, and wonder why the universe hated him so much.

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*12:32 a.m.*

It almost seemed as though the clock on Will's nightstand was taunting him, dragging each minute by as slowly as possible. Will already knew he wasn't going to sleep tonight - he had made peace with that. But he had at least hoped that the fates would allow the night to pass quickly, so he could hurry up and go back out and look for Mike. But with each minute passing by agonizingly slow, Will

knew that wasn't going to happen either. And what's more, with every passing moment he was getting angrier and angrier with everyone, himself most of all.

What the *fuck* were they doing? The Party doesn't just sit around and wait for shit to happen. They *take action*. Why wasn't anyone rallying them together? Why wasn't anyone making a plan? And then it hit him...all of the sudden it hit him. It was Mike. Mike was the one who always made the plans. He was the one that rallied everyone together. He was the one who *never* gave up. With him gone, the Party needed someone to step up and take the reins. In any other circumstance, Will would have made a thousand excuses to not be that person. That wasn't him, that wasn't his role, it just wasn't something he was comfortable doing. But now? They didn't have any time to waste. "Fuck it," he said, sitting up in bed and grabbing his SuperCom. "This is Will, ordering an emergency meeting of the Party. Is anyone awake? Over."

Max answered right away. "Will, what's up? Did they find anything? Over."

"No. And they won't either, not without our help. Over."

"What did you have in mind? Over." Lucas' voice piped in, sounding bright and alert. Didn't sound as if he had been getting any sleep either.

"We have to go back out there and look for him. Over," Will stated matter-of-factly.

"Hopper's gonna kill us all himself if we go back out there tonight, over," Dustin said, sounding as if he may have just been drifting off.

"He'll understand....he'll just have to, over."

"Will..." It was Eleven. "What are you doing? You heard what Jim said. We can't do this....over."

At any other time Will would've felt extreme pride that she finally remembered to say 'over' at the end. But this was not any other time, and the anger that had been building up in him this whole time



exploded, right towards Eleven. "Bullshit El! When I went missing, guess what Mike had everyone out there doing at night? Looking for me. I've heard the story hundreds of times, how he kept pushing everyone to search! How he wouldn't give up on me. And furthermore, if they hadn't been out looking for me, they wouldn't have ever found you. Those men from the lab might've found you first, and you still might be back there living with your 'Papa'."

A hush fell over the SuperComs, and Will wanted to take it back as soon as he said it. They all knew that El's past life was a topic that was not to be brought up for discussion. "Fuck, El, I'm sor-"

"No...you are right. Mike would go to look for his friends, so we should go to look for him. But no splitting up, we all stay together, yes?"

Will cringed as he heard El's speech patterns falling back into her old ways. It happened every now and then when she felt threatened or nervous...but Will never dreamed that he would be the cause of that.

"Yes, together," Will confirmed, still feeling shitty. He'd apologize to her in person instead of over the comms though. "Is everyone else in? Over."

After getting affirmative answers from the rest of the Party, he told them to gear up and meet at Castle Byers in an hour. "Hopper's been gone all night, coordinating the search from the station I think, or still out looking himself, so sneaking out will be easy for El and I. Everyone bring a flashlight and anything else you think will be useful. Over and out."

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Will was ready in fifteen minutes. He got dressed in warm clothes, packed a backpack full of whatever gear he thought would come in handy, and then sat down on the edge of his bed to wait. He knew it would take the others longer to get here, which is why he gave them so much time. Just as he was beginning to wonder if he should get El and get started early, there was a light knock on his door.

"Come in," he said softly, thinking it odd that El had come right when

he was thinking about her. But it wasn't El, it was his mom - and she was now looking at him all geared up and ready to leave. Fuck...here comes the yelling. Only the yelling didn't come. Joyce didn't even seem to mind he was going to sneak out.

"Will...baby...Jim is back, he wants to talk to you and El. There's been a...development."

Shit, he had been so preoccupied, he hadn't even heard the chief pull up. Will frowned deeply as he followed his mom out to the kitchen where Hopper and El were already waiting. A development....what the fuck did that mean?

"Will you should sit," Hopper began, his voice serious. Will wordlessly slipped into the seat beside Eleven and waited. He could already see the dread on her face.

"We got an anonymous tip about an hour ago. We followed it up and...well...we found Mike. He's -"

"You found him!?" Will piped up. But the heartbreaking look on his mom's face did not portray good news. "He's....he's hurt isn't he? How bad is it? Is he in the hospital? Does he need surgery? Is he in a coma?"

Will allowed his voice to say every bad thing that he could think of that would make sense. Everything that would match Hopper's somber tone and his mother's pinched face. But the one thing that he would never have been ready for...the one thing that he would NEVER allow his mind to think...those just happened to be the next words that came out of the sheriff's mouth.

"Will, El, I'm sorry. Mike is dead. We found his body out in the woods."

He could hear El gasp audibly next to him and begin to sob. He could see his mother rush over to wrap her in a comforting embrace. He could *feel* Hopper's eyes on him, waiting for his reaction, waiting for him to lose it. But he wasn't going to, because this was ridiculous - Mike wasn't dead. He couldn't be.

"I would like to see the body," he said calmly. But Hopper just shook his head firmly.

"You don't need to see it, and it wouldn't help anyways. It was....it was burned beyond recognition. You wouldn't even be able to tell it was him."

"Then how do YOU know it's him?" Will scoffed. This was even more ridiculous than he thought. "We know that bodies can be faked, they did it with mine."

"Will...I was there for this autopsy. It was a real body. The height and build match Mike, and he's the only kid that's currently missing in Hawkins."

"That doesn't mean -"

"We matched his dental records kid. I'm sorry...they were a perfect match."

"No! Just....just wait a minute," Will said, beginning to panic, his mind searching for something - anything - that could stave off what was beginning to feel inevitable. Suddenly something clicked. "El!" he shouted, turning to her. "Can't you search for Mike? You know, with your powers? How you used to look for people? We can find out where -"

"I tried, Will," she said softly, tears still running from her eyes. "That was the first thing I tried when I heard he was missing. Before we even went out to look for him. I didn't say anything because I was trying to hold out hope but...I couldn't find him anywhere."

So that's why she was so disconsolate during the search - she already knew. Will could feel it now. He could feel it seeping into his bones...they were right. Mike was -

"NO!" he screamed, jumping up from his seat and slamming his hands on the table. "WHY ARE YOU ALL SO ACCEPTING OF THIS?! HE'S NOT GONE! HE'S NOT! THIS IS BULLSHIT, IT'S LIKE I'M THE ONLY ONE THAT -"

"DON'T," Hop barked, out, stopping Will mid-rant. "Don't say

something you're gonna regret, kid," he continued, softening his voice. "This is painful for all of us....we all loved Mike."

"Love," Will said, less angry, but stubbornly insistent. "We love him...don't use past tense, he's not -"

Will cut off mid-sentence as Hopper pulled something from his pocket. It was a bit discolored and a little misshapen, but Will would recognize it anywhere. "We found this on the body," he said, dangling the Triforce necklace out in front of him.

Shooting around the table in a flash, Will snatched it from the sheriff's hand. Hopper did nothing to move or try to stop him. "I'm breaking a few rules by letting you have that back, but we already dusted it for fingerprints, and the only ones on there were Mike's."

The boy held the necklace, letting the chain slip through his fingers, tracing the now slightly melted triangles with his thumb. This was definitely Mike's, no doubt about it. He had seen it on him a thousand times - his mind vividly recalled the last time, less than twelve hours ago.

*"You're still coming over Saturday right? I've been planning this campaign for awhile, I think it's one of my best!"*

But....now they would never know, would they?

Will suddenly found it difficult to get any air into his lungs.

*There would be no more campaigns, no more sleepovers.*

His head began to spin as his body cried out for oxygen.

*No more hangouts at the arcade or the movie theater.*

Spots started appearing before his eyes and he could feel himself beginning to black out. He vaguely heard his mother yelling at him to breathe, but his body wouldn't listen.

*No more late night calls on the phone or SuperCom after Will had a nightmare, just...no more Mike. No more Mi-*

Nope. That wasn't an option. Not at all. Will's body finally listened and with a loud gasp, he filled his lungs with some much needed oxygen. He took several deep breaths to compose himself before finally responding to Hopper.

"I see....thank you," he said flatly, turning on his heel and heading back to his room. El and Joyce were both sobbing, looking at Will questioningly.

"Will, Honey," Joyce began as she put a hand softly on his shoulder as he passed by. But he didn't stop, simply shrugging it off as he continued down the hall.

"Give him a second, the kid's in shock," he heard Hopper mutter before he closed his bedroom door behind him. He sank down in his chair at his desk, just running his hands over the necklace over and over again.

That was where his mom found him five minutes later when she came to check on him.

"Hey Sweetie," she said cautiously, sitting down on the edge of Will's bed. She was about to say more, but she was cut off by a wry chuckle from Will.

"Sorry about that out there Mom, I kinda freaked out a bit. Everything's okay now though."

Joyce paused, taken aback by that statement. "Will...everything is not okay -"

"It's just a necklace, Mom," he replied, with a grin. "And it's still recognizable, it's not ruined."

"But....Mike..."

"Yeah, he'll be happy we found it. He really should take better care of his things, but he's always been a little absent-minded though."

"Oh, Will," she said, her voice starting to break.

"Don't worry, I'm not mad at him," Will said cheerily. "Just gonna

give him a little bit of a hard time next time I see him is all. But -"

"WILL!" she shouted, finally gaining his attention. "He's gone...he's not coming back. Mike is dead. I'm so sorry sweetheart."

They stared at each other as the smile plastered on Will's face began to slowly falter as everything sunk in at last, as his brain finally allowed him to accept the truth. And then the dam broke and he fell into his mom's arms as sobs wracked his entire body.

"H-how could I let this happen?!" he choked out.

"Will, this is NOT your fault, it just -"

"He's saved me SO MANY TIMES though! And the ONE TIME he needed me...the one time he needed saving...I wasn't there. I couldn't even rescue him once."

Joyce knew there was nothing she could say to comfort her boy, so she just wrapped him tighter, rocking him gently as he wept. Whether it went on for five minutes or fifty minutes, Will wasn't sure, but by the time it ended, he was all cried out - he was sure there were no more tears left in him. He had shifted so that he was laying down on his bed, with his head in his mother's lap. Everything in the room had been quiet for several minutes now, aside from the occasional snuffle.

"I loved him you know," Will said, shattering the stillness of the room. He said it so plainly and matter-of-factly, he surprised even himself.

"I know honey," Joyce replied, brushing his sweat dampened hair off of his forehead. "We all loved Mike. So much."

But Will shook his head, determined to get this out. "No, I mean I *loved* him, like...I was in love with him." He felt his face heat up slightly with the admission, but he was beyond being embarrassed at this point.

"Oh?" Joyce asked softly. Then comprehension finally clicked in her brain. "Oh! Oh my God...how could I have not seen it?"

Will looked up into her eyes and gave a weak smile. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you...but you don't care right? That I'm..." he trailed off. He knew she wouldn't but he still needed to hear it.

"Of course not, Will, I wouldn't care about something like that. But wait...were you and Mike...together? I thought he and Jane -"

"No," Will said quickly. "We weren't together. I was too much of a coward to ever tell him. Mike didn't even know how I felt about him. And now he never will."

And with that statement Will found out that he did indeed have tears left to cry that night as the fact that his best friend and first love were gone forever became his new reality.

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His head hurt so badly. Every inhale, every pulse sent a fresh wave of pain searing through his brain. He wanted badly to bring his hands up to try to massage his temples, but he found he couldn't move his arms. With great effort he opened his eyes, fighting to keep them from flying shut again as they were met with harsh fluorescent lighting. He eventually was able to look up and ascertain that he was strapped to a table by his wrists and ankles, the metal shackles feeling cool against his skin.

He also realized he was shirtless, and had been left only in his underwear and a pair of shorts. Electrodes were attached to his chest and arms at various points, and it felt like there were at least two of them on his head as well. All of this he noticed in a second, but was pushed to the side as he realized he wasn't alone in the room.

"Hey...hey! Where the fuck am I you bastards? Where are my clothes? You better let me go, I know the sheriff and -"

"Well, well, well, look who's awake," a deep, rich voice cut him off. Two men strode into view, one tall and lean, the other shorter and stocky - both were wearing lab coats. The tall one was the one doing the talking. "We're well aware about who you are and who you know. But you don't know who we are - or what we're capable of. So I suggest you familiarize yourself with some simple rules. Rule Number

1 - Don't speak unless spoken to."

"Fuck that," the boy spat back in his typical fiery fashion. "You guys are gonna pay for -"

At a nod from the tall man, the shorter man pressed a button, and what felt like a lightning bolt made its way through the boy's body. The pain was like nothing he had ever felt before as his entire body shook on the table. After a few seconds, it was over, and he had to bite his lip to try to keep from crying.

"Rule Number 2," the tall man continued, as if nothing had happened, "any breaking of the rules will be met with significant consequences. Do we understand each other now....Mr. Wheeler?"

The dark-haired boy looked between the two strange faces before him, both cruel and unrelenting. He was trapped, alone, outnumbered, and had no idea where he was. Mike Wheeler was royally fucked.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Whew! That was a roller coaster I know. I almost ended the chapter with everyone thinking Mike was dead, but I couldn't do that to y'all. As always, comments, kudos, feedback are all appreciated. Next chapter will probably be out next Saturday or Sunday. Until then!



### 3. Chapter 3

#### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is a little shorter than the last two, but you get to learn what's happening with Mike, and just how much trouble he's in. Enjoy!

After effectively shutting Mike up with the electric shock, his captors had resumed whatever they had been doing in the other part of the room, apparently not quite ready to speak with him yet. This left Mike alone with his thoughts as he tried to remember how he had gotten into this situation. His memory slowly came back in bits and pieces. He remembered leaving the Byers house after talking with El and saying goodbye to Will. He had been pretty deep in his own thoughts as he trudged through the woods back towards his house - he did have a lot to think about after all. That's why he didn't hear the rustling behind him until it was too late. He tried to spin around, but only got half way before a heavy blow fell upon his head, knocking him out.

He had woken up to a swaying sensation, and gradually became aware that he was being carried. He listened, determined not to let his captor know that he was awake yet.

"This kid is a lot heavier than he looks," the man carrying him muttered.

"Don't worry, we're here now," another answered. So there were two of them! Mike subtly twisted his head and opened his eyes to see where 'here' was. He spied the old, shut down Hawkins Lab beyond the fence.

"Fools, this is the first place they'll look for me," he thought to himself. A moment later he was disappointed though, as they didn't cross the fence line, but instead stopped by a shed-like building made of stone that was outside of the fence line. He started to panic slightly at this, and must've moved too much, bringing attention to himself.

"Hey, I think he's awake," the man carrying him said. The next thing

he knew there was a hypodermic needle being plunged into his neck, and that was the last thing that Mike remembered until waking up strapped to this table.

Which, Mike thought wryly, was not very comfortable at all. They had him splayed out like a starfish, each of his limbs secured to one of the four corners of the table, and there was an IV attached to his right arm, the tube leading up through a regulating machine to a bag of clear fluid. He shifted his head slightly, trying to get a look around the room. It was a circular room, stuffed to the brim with all sorts of computers and fancy lab equipment. Mike could see two doors, one directly to his left and the other straight across from it to his right. He vaguely registered that his shirt was gone, and he definitely wasn't wearing the shorts that he's dressed in now. Before he can dwell on that too much, the men made their way back over.

"So sorry to have kept you waiting Mr. Wheeler," the tall man said with an oily smile. "I think it's time that proper introductions were made."

He was a tall man, probably in his mid to late 30s, brown hair slicked back against his head. His teeth were white and perfect - maybe a little too perfect - and his overall looks and demeanor reminded Mike of a used car salesman. "My name is Dr. Green. This here is my associate, Dr. Schneider."

Dr. Schneider was everything that his partner wasn't - short, older, and balding. He didn't try to plaster a fake smile on, choosing instead to apparently have his face contorted into a permanent scowl.

"You'll excuse me if I don't offer to shake your hands," Mike replied sarcastically, wiggling the fingers of his currently restrained hands. An ugly look appeared on Dr. Green's face for just a moment before it was replaced with his phony smile. Mike thought another shock was coming his way, but it didn't.

"You really do have a mouth on you, don't you? Well, that's alright...that's going to make you even more fun to break." It was clear that Dr. Green was the talker of the two, as the other man still hadn't uttered a word. Mike's heart sped up a bit at the man's statement, wondering what this pair had in store for him. "Now, you

probably have a lot of questions, which is to be expected. But we're only going to allow you three, so choose carefully."

Mike knew exactly what was going on here. There was no reason for them to give him any questions at all. But they were already playing mind games with him - showing him who had all the control, letting him have whatever little morsels that they deigned to give him. Standing over him in a menacing fashion, while he was forced to look up at them from his spot on the table. Yes, he knew...but he wasn't going to turn down any free information either.

"What do you mean, break me?" he asked, making sure to keep his voice steady and calm.

"Good question, because in order to answer that, I'll have to give you a little background. You see, Dr. Schneider and I were colleagues of Dr. Brenner. We were all part of the groundbreaking research that was done at Hawkins Laboratories. Imagine, humans with extraordinary powers - telekinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance!" The man's eyes suddenly turned cold though. "But the world wasn't ready to make the necessary sacrifices. With all the rules and ethics we had to abide by, we would've never succeeded. So we made our own rules, followed our own way, and the result was fantastic - as your friend Eleven can attest to."

Mike's anger flared as Dr. Green dared to speak her name. He managed to keep himself under control though, as he was in no position to do anything anyways. "That is," the man continued, "until you and your nosy friends got involved. You ruined everything, took away all we had worked so hard for. Our organization was left with nothing - no subjects, no facilities, and our colleagues were all either killed or arrested. The only reason Dr. Schneider and myself were able to escape was we were out of town on assignment. We immediately went into hiding when we heard, waiting for things to cool down. But all the while we stayed busy planning our revenge - which brings us to you, Mr. Wheeler."

At a nod from his colleague, Dr. Schneider took up the tale, in a voice that had just a hint of a German accent. "You see we want it all back, everything you took from us. But we have to start from scratch. Normally, we take children from birth. It's much easier to mold them

that way. And we would NEVER use someone as old as you under prime circumstances, but we're far from that. So, we're willing to give it a try and see what happens. But, your mind is already conditioned against many of our methods, as anyone in a so-called normal upbringing would be. So before we can begin implementing our usual procedures, we must break you."

That last line was so menacing, Mike heard himself audibly gulp. They wanted to turn him into one of their experiments, and they were willing to do whatever it took to get there. Dr. Green must have noticed his nervousness, because a self-satisfying smirk was now present on his face. Mike scolded himself for betraying any emotion, and sought to regain some type of control.

"My friends are going to find me! You guys aren't going to get away with this!"

He immediately regretted that decision as he felt electricity course through his body once again, and this time he was not able to get his tongue out of the way before his jaw clenched shut. When the current was cut off, he found himself spitting up blood from the injury. He moved his tongue around carefully, and while it hurt, a lot, he didn't seem to have sustained any major damage.

"That, Mr. Wheeler, was not a question, it was a statement," Dr. Green informed him. "Please try to remember the rules. Now then, we'll still count that as your second, I think. Your friends and family are no longer out looking for you for the simple fact that they already found you."

Mike didn't dare speak again, but instead let the puzzled look on his face do the talking for him. "We planted a body in the woods," the man continued. "But we learned from the mistakes we made last time using a fake body with that Byers kid. We used a real body this time. It was just a matter of waiting for a suitable body to turn up in one of the statewide morgues we had an eye on. Took longer than expected to get one that matched your size closely enough, but we're patient people Mr. Wheeler. After that it was just a matter of burning the corpse beyond recognition, altering its dental work to match yours, and placing a few of your personal items on it. Not perfect, but good enough to fool everyone into stopping the search for you."

Mike was beginning to be filled with a panicking sensation, and it only grew more when the man continued and cut off his final hope.

"And just in case you're thinking your girlfriend can use her powers to locate you, think again. When creating our test subjects we realized we needed to build in some safe guards, just in case those powers fell into the wrong hands. This room we're currently located in was specifically designed to shield against anyone telepathic powers such as hers. She won't be able to find you. So I repeat...no one is searching for you anymore."

The dark-haired boy's head was spinning at the amount of careful planning and preparation this had taken. This wasn't some spur of the moment scheme to grab any kid and try to replicate their experiments. They had targeted him specifically, even waiting until they had the proper corpse to pull off their little game. So Mike asked the only question left that was reasonable.

"Why me?"

"Why you?" Dr. Green laughed harshly. "This whole thing is your fault. You're the one that wouldn't give up on that Byers boy. The one that kept everyone looking. The one that still believed he was alive. If it weren't for you, Hawkins Lab would still be up and thriving. Sure, your friend would've died, but such sacrifices are necessary for science sometimes. But now...we have to settle for you. And while there's very little chance of success in turning you into what we want, your torture will be reward enough for us either way. Now, I believe that was question number three, so let's get started Dr. Schneider."

Mike's eyes shifted nervously to the older of the two doctors, whose lips were curled into a cruel smile as he approached with the button controlling the electric shocks. "Now," he said, "this might hurt just a little bit."

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When Will woke up to the delicious smell of bacon sizzling, he thought he must be dreaming. No one ever made breakfast at home since Jonathan moved to New York for college. But as he blinked himself awake, the smell persisted, and he heard a familiar voice

coming from the kitchen. Jonathan! He was home! His excitement lasted for only about ten seconds before he remembered why Jonathan was home. He had likely come back with Nancy, who was attending the same college. Nancy, who was probably a wreck right now. Nancy, who was a wreck because her little brother was dead. And just like that, the events of last night came crashing back on Will in full force. He was about to just turn right back over and go back to sleep when there was a knock on his door.

"Come in," he sighed, sitting up after a short debate. He knew he couldn't hide out in his room forever after all. It was indeed his brother who opened his door, carrying a tray with him.

"Hey, buddy," Jonathan said with small, sad smile.

"H-hi Jonathan," was all he could get out before he felt the tears starting to fall again. His brother placed the tray down on his nightstand and rushed over to wrap him in a hug.

"Oh, Will....I'm so sorry man."

His brother's calming presence helped Will manage to control himself before he broke down completely. He was going to turn down Jonathan's offer of breakfast at first before he realized just how hungry he actually was, so instead he meekly took the tray with a thank you, and started to eat. Jonathan stayed to keep him company.

"It just hurts so bad, you know?" Will said between bites. "Knowing that you're never going to see someone again."

"Like a part of your own being is gone forever, and you can't do anything about it" his brother replied softly. "Yeah, we all went through that when we thought you were dead."

Will nodded in understanding. Mike had talked to him about it before, the feeling he had when Will's fake body was pulled out of the water. Heartbreaking, he had said. At the time, Will had thought it was just a stronger word for sad. But now that it was actually happening to him, he understood. It actually *felt* like your heart was ripping itself in half. The pain in your chest was spread out to every part of your body, but right there, at its origin, it was almost

unbearable.

The younger boy took a deep breath. "Did Mom tell you...what I told her last night?"

Jonathan just quirked an eyebrow, unsure of what Will was talking about. She obviously hadn't.

"I told Mom that I think I'm...umm....that I..." Will stumbled, thinking about what words he wanted to use. "I had a crush on Mike," he settled for finally. "I, um, like boys, not girls."

His older brother's mouth formed a small 'o' of surprise, but it didn't last long before he placed a reassuring hand on Will's shoulder. "Thank you for telling me, buddy. You know I'll always love you, no matter what, right? That kind of stuff doesn't matter to me."

Will knew this. When he had been contemplating whether or not to tell his family, he had always been the least concerned about Jonathan. "Thanks...I just wish I had told Mike before he..."

Jonathan nodded, sparing Will from finishing the thought aloud. "Who all knows? Just so I don't spill the beans to anyone I'm not supposed to."

"Just Mom, you, and El," Will answered, thankful for the distraction this conversation was providing. "Hopper will probably find out soon...but I don't really want anyone else to know. You've seen how I already get treated at school, and that's when they were only rumors. If it comes out that I'm actually queer -"

"Gay," Jonathan said. "I think the preferred term is gay, Will. And I understand if you want to keep it secret, but just know that not all places are like Hawkins. My time in New York has really opened my eyes to it Will. People of all kinds of different alternative lifestyles are living out in the open with no shame at all."

"Really?" Will asked, his eyes opening wide with hope. He had just kind of assumed that this was how the world was. That he'd be shunned and treated like a leper forever...but maybe there was a chance...

"For sure. I know it seems like a long time...but just survive high school, and then get out of this shitty town. It doesn't deserve you anyways, Will. You're the kindest, most generous, most loyal person I've ever known. You're gonna shine out there in the world, I just know it."

Tears began pricking at the back of Will's eyes yet again, but this time for a completely different reason. "Thanks Jonathan...that means a lot."

His brother smiled and nudged him playfully with an elbow. When Will had finished eating, Jonathan informed him that he'd be spending all day with the family, specifically Will. "Mom kinda put me 'in charge' of you," he said, wincing a bit as he saw Will scowl at the word choice. "I know, I know. You're not a kid anymore, you don't need anyone to take care of you. That's why I convinced her that I might be the better choice for today instead of her, as Mom tends to get...clingy."

Will snorted a bit. "That's an understatement," he said wryly.

"Yeah, I know. So I'll give you as much space or as little space as you want. You don't have to leave your bed all day, or we could go hang out and do something. Just...try to take it easy today though, Mom wants you to save your strength for tomorrow."

"And where is Mom gonna be then?"

"She'll be here, but she's focused on Jane right now, as Hopper is busy at the station today with the investigation. But don't worry about any of that. Just figure out what you want to do while I run these dishes to the kitchen."

Will nodded, but just as his brother got to the door, something struck him. "Hey, you said Mom wanted me to save my strength for tomorrow. Why? What's happening tomorrow?" Will asked, brow furrowed in concern.

Jonathan steadied himself a bit before turning back and locking eyes with Will. "The Wheelers - they've decided to have Mike's funeral tomorrow."



## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thoughts, comments, kudos are all appreciated. Next chapter due out end of next week, but enough feedback may persuade me to update a little faster haha. Thanks for reading!

## 4. Chapter 4

### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter has a lengthy flashback near the end. I hope it doesn't feel clunky, but it's important to the story and has some cute fluff moments.

He wasn't sure how long had passed since he'd been abducted. He wasn't sure how many times they'd jolted him with electricity. He wasn't sure how many times he'd passed out from the pain only to immediately be woken up with a bucket of water dumped onto his head. All Mike Wheeler knew was this was the first time he had felt that dying might just be a better option than living.

The thought had shocked him at first really. He was usually so optimistic, not willing to give up on anything. But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. He was alone, just a teenager, against two adults. He couldn't move; hell, he couldn't even speak for fear of more repercussions. And what's worse, no one was looking for him. They thought he was dead.

Plus Mike had spied a number of nasty looking saws and other surgical items on a table not that far away from him. He shuddered to think what those would feel like, but thankfully his captors hadn't actually used any of them on him...yet. The torture had been limited to electric shocks and sleep deprivation, but the men seemed to be growing impatient with the slow progress.

"It's not working," Dr. Green muttered to his colleague, obviously thinking Mike was unconscious.

"We knew it was a long shot," Dr. Schneider replied.

"We might have to resort to more drastic measure then. Wake him up."

Mike tried to brace himself but it still took his breath away when another ice cold bucket of water was thrown over him. He gasped as he tried to regain his oxygen, his still shirtless body shivering at the

shock.

"Welcome back Mr. Wheeler. We're now going to move to phase 2," Dr. Green said.

Before Mike could determine whether or not it would be worth it to ask what that meant, Dr. Schneider walked up to him and started rubbing up and down his bare arm. No...they weren't going to...

"Wh-what are -?" he started to stammer out. Dr. Green cut him off with a harsh laugh.

"Don't worry, neither Dr. Schneider or myself have those...particular tastes," he said, smiling. "Though in a moment here you may be wishing that's what we were interested in."

He didn't have a chance to process what that statement meant, because the stocky doctor had apparently found the spot at Mike's elbow that he was looking for, and suddenly applied an enormous amount of force in bending it - the opposite way it was supposed to go.

"AAAHHHHHHH!!" Mike screamed as he heard a sound between a crunch and a snap. Pain shot all up and down his arm as he writhed on the table. His arms were still in restraints, so he couldn't even cradle his injured arm to his chest. The two doctors just looked down at him cruelly as he started to sob miserably. He couldn't do this anymore. He needed someone to come and save him. "Please," he choked out between tears, his body wracked in pain. "Someone...anyone. Mom....El...WILLLLLLLLLLLLLL!!"

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Will Byers sat straight up in bed, a chill running down his spine. He's not sure what had woke him up, as he had actually been sleeping rather well, considering what was waiting for him today. He figured it had been the sheer exhaustion and stress of the past few days that had allowed him to finally sleep decently. But now he had a sick, nauseous feeling in his stomach that was not going away. He glanced at his clock, seeing that it was three in the morning, and then looked down at the floor where Jonathan was sleeping peacefully in a

sleeping bag.

They had spent the previous day together, hanging out in Will's room. At first, Will didn't think he would like being hovered over all day, but he actually really had enjoyed the company. And, to his surprise, the thing they talked about most was Mike. Will found himself telling all of his funny stories about Mike to his brother, with Jonathan laughing along, even if he had heard some of them before. Talking about him almost made it seem that he was still there. But now, in the dark cold of the early morning, that brief respite had disappeared, and reality had set back in. Mike was gone...and Will was ANGRY.

He was done being sad, done being depressed, done being...useless. If he couldn't have Mike back, Will decided he would have the next best thing - revenge.

The boy carefully crept out of bed and around Jonathan's sleeping form. He made his way out into the kitchen where his eyes immediately found what he was looking for - Hopper's police bag from work. He took a deep breath as he grabbed it and sat in on the dining room table. He knew Hopper was going to be pissed. This was one of the first rules he had made when he moved in - don't interfere with police business. There were times he was inevitably going to have to bring his work home with him, and he didn't want any of his family getting involved in it - and that went for everyone.

"But," Will thought bitterly as he ripped open the bag, "I'm already involved."

Mike's case file was laying on top, which made sense. It was probably the last thing Hopper looked at before he went to bed. The boy grabbed it and steeled his nerve. There were going to be graphic pictures and description in here, he knew that. But he had to find something...some clue to who did this. He couldn't be there for Mike when he was alive, he wouldn't continue to fail him now.

The case report was first, and as expected it was written out in gruesome detail. Adolescent corpse found in the forest outside of town, badly burned, no chance of facial identification. However dental records and personal effects found on the body conclusively

determined the body to be Mike Wheeler, 15 years old, resident of Hawkins. Will wiped the tears from his eyes as he took in every word, not wanting to miss any potential clue, but the suspects seemed to have left nothing behind. Frustrated Will turned the page and his breath caught in his chest. There it was...no, there he was. Mike's body...or what was left of it.

It was just as badly charred as Hopper had said, with bone and burnt flesh the only thing remaining. Will began to wonder if this was a good idea as his stomach threatened to heave up its contents. He quickly turned the page again to find another picture of a sort. It was a full body x-ray done by the coroner. Although still not cheery, it was not nearly as difficult to look at as the previous image. In fact, in skeleton form, Mike almost looked like he was smiling. Then again, it didn't really look like Mike. When reduced down to the bones, it would be near impossible to tell one human from another.

Will took a second to study it, marveling at the simplicity of it all. The simple structure, the smoothness of the bones....hmmm. He frowned as he ran a finger over the skeleton's right tibia, something sticking in his mind. Oh....OH! The boy frantically turned pages, until he found a close up x-ray of the leg. He looked once, twice, three times, just to make sure, but a smile began to make its way across his face as he remembered:

*Flashback (Six Years ago)*

*"Come on Will, it's not that high," Mike called down.*

*The precocious nine-year-old was high amongst the branches in the tree of the Wheeler's front yard. Will, on the other hand, had contented himself with staying on the lowest branch. He honestly thought that he had done well to get that far. "Uh, no thanks, I'm good down here Mike."*

*"What?" he said in disbelief. "But you can barely see ANYTHING from down there. Come on up, you can see all the way over to the next block from here."*

*"I've seen that block plenty of times," Will replied stubbornly. "There's nothing special about it."*



*Mrs. Wheeler.*

*"Michael, oh my God, what happened?!"*

*Will started to speak up but Mike cut him off. "I-I slipped and fell off of one of the high branches."*

*Will's mouth snapped shut in confusion.*

*"See, this is why I didn't want you climbing trees like that," Mrs. Wheeler said, trying to sound angry but her worry clearly coming through. "Nancy! Clean Will up and call Joyce. I'm taking Michael to the hospital."*

*All Will could do was watch as a now sobbing Mike was scooped up into his mother's arms and loaded gently into the car.*

*It was some hours later that Will found himself sitting in the hospital waiting room next to his mother. She had been horrified at the sight of him, her baby boy all bleeding and bruised, and wanted to take him home right away, but he had put up such a fuss about making sure Mike was alright first, she had finally relented and drove them to the hospital. He didn't mention the massive headache he was having, otherwise she never would've let them come.*

*"Will?"*

*Will's head snapped up and he saw his friend being rolled towards him in a wheelchair. "Mike!!" he squeaked, jumping up and running over, Joyce following along at his heels. He stopped a little short though when he saw Mike's entire lower leg covered in a cast.*

*"How is he?" Joyce asked.*

*"Broken tibia," Karen sighed. "Doctor said it was a clean break though, should heal within six weeks, no lasting side effects." Will let out a breath of relief as the four of them made their way out of the hospital. "You mind watching him for a second while I pull the car around?" Karen asked.*

*"Of course not," Joyce smiled. Karen walked off, leaving Joyce with the two boys. Will hadn't said anything since he saw the cast, but finally broke his silence.*

*"Mom, c-can I talk to Mike, um, alone for a sec?"*

*Joyce quirked an eyebrow curiously, but shrugged. "Alright, I'm just gonna have a smoke over there a ways, but I'll be watching. Don't move from this spot." The look she gave punctuated the fact that she was not to be messed with. Will nodded in agreement. As soon as his mom was out of hearing distance he wheeled on Mike.*

*"You lied!"*

*"What are you talking about, Will?" Mike replied, feigning an innocent look. But Will knew him too well to buy that.*

*"You didn't fall out of that tree Mike, you jumped....to save me. Why are you lying?"*

*It looked like he wanted to argue for a second, but instead the dark-haired boy just sighed and gave in. "I didn't want my mom blaming you for me getting hurt," he said simply. "It wasn't your fault -"*

*"But it was! You jumped to save me. If I hadn't fallen, you would've never had to put yourself in danger for me."*

*"But, you never would've been trying to climb up that high if I didn't try to force you," Mike countered stubbornly. "Just...it's fine Will. I broke my leg, it'll heal. The way you were going to fall though...you could've died. I don't regret what I did at all, so just...let it be. Keep it a secret. Please?"*

*Did Will mention he could never really say no to Mike Wheeler? He snuck a glance at his Mom who had turned momentarily to gaze off into the parking lot. Will quickly bent down and wrapped his arms around Mike in a hug. "Okay you win. Thank you Mikey...for saving me."*

*They broke apart and Mike just looked up at him with that toothy smile Will loved so much. "Of course, Will, you're my best friend...I'll always save you."*

*A funny feeling started to erupt in Will's stomach, something that was uncomfortable yet intoxicating all at once. He wasn't sure if he wanted more of it, or wanted it to go away immediately. He didn't have time to dwell on it though, as Karen had pulled up with the car. Mike waved from the backseat as he pulled away, leaving Will with a smile on his face.*



*"So," his mom said, breaking him out of his trance, "do I get to know what that was about?"*

*Will pretended to think it over before shaking his head. "It's a secret."*

---

*It was about five weeks later when Mike got his cast removed. He had invited Will, Dustin, and Lucas over to celebrate. He'd been going bored out of his mind not being able to go outside and enjoy the things he usually would. They had visited him as often as their parents would allow, but it still seemed like torture for Mike.*

*Will was the first of his friends to show up, and Mrs. Wheeler directed him upstairs to Mike's room.*

*"Will, you're here!" he said excitedly. He was wearing shorts and Will exhaled greatly when he saw the boy's leg with the cast taken off.*

*"It's really gone, huh?"*

*"Yep, good as new!" he smiled. "Hey, you wanna see something cool? The doctor let me keep the x-ray they took today."*

*He walked over to the dresser and picked up the x-ray that was laying on top, holding it up to the light so they could look at it. After inspecting it for a moment, Will looked over at his friend puzzled. "This is the x-ray from today? It still looks like your leg has a crack in it right there," he said, pointing to a thin line running across the bone.*

*Mike just laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, I thought that at first too. But that's just the point where the bones healed back together. The doctor called it a mend line. He said it would always be there."*

*"You're always gonna have a crack in your leg!?" Will blurted, guilt immediately tumbling down on him. This was his fault.*

*"Not a crack, it doesn't hurt. And the doctor said it didn't affect the healing, it's as strong as it always was. It's basically just a scar that no one can see."*

*Will frowned. "But still..."*

*"But nothing, Byers!" Mike cut him off, punching him softly in the shoulder. "I'm fine, it's fine, everything is fine. I promise."*

*The younger boy still wasn't sure, but any further discussion was cut off by Mike's mother yelling up the stairs. "Mike, Dustin and Lucas are here!"*

*"COMING!" Mike shouted back before turning to Will. "So, I hope you guys don't mind, but my mom said she doesn't really want me playing outside for at least one more day. Something about she's not going to have me re-breaking something on the same day I got my cast off." He looked a little worried that Will might be disappointed.*

*"Of course I don't mind. What did you want to do?" Will said, smiling at the look of relief that came over his friend's face.*

*Mike pointed over to a box laying on his bed. "Well, my mom took me by the store on my way home to let me pick out a new game to play with you guys. It looks pretty cool, but also a little complicated. It'll probably only keep our attention for a couple days, but it's worth a shot maybe."*

*Will glanced over at the box emblazoned with 'Dungeons & Dragons' on its lid and grinned. "Sure why not!"*

*None of them would probably even like the game, but he didn't care. After all, as long as he was with Mike, it didn't really matter to Will what they were doing.*

*End Flashback*

Will examined the leg x-ray in front of him. The bone was completely smooth. There was no mend line, and that could only mean one thing.

Mike was alive.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Not sure if bones heal exactly like that, but they do in my story, and that's all that matters haha.

Drop a comment below with your thoughts on the chapter. Authors love comments!

## 5. Chapter 5

### Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, here's the next installment. Things are really starting to heat up now! Btw, I forgot to say so at the end notes of the last chapter, but sorry if anyone was actually looking forward to seeing Mike's funeral. That was never going to happen in this fic. I like me some angst, but even I have my limits.

Also, I may have taken a few liberties with how El's powers work, but nothing too story altering. Anyhow, hope y'all enjoy this chapter!

"He's alive!!" Will screamed out, bursting into his mother's bedroom and flipping on the light. Joyce sat straight up in bed immediately, having had years of conditioning of waking up to Will shouting in the middle of the night. She looked around wildly, making sure there was no immediate danger before refocusing on Will.

"Will, are you okay? What are -"

"I'm fine," Will said, cutting her off, waving the x-ray wildly. "Mike. He's alive!"

"Oh honey, not this again," Joyce said worriedly.

Hopper had sat up by this time, looking none too pleased. He had been working long, hard hours on this case after all. "Is *that* from my work bag?" he grumbled, fixing Will with a stern look. Will's confidence fluttered, but only for a moment.

"Yes, it is, and I'm sorry Hop, and I'll take whatever punishment you want to give me, but please, listen first. I'm not crazy or in denial. I have actual proof that the body you found wasn't Mike's."

A glint of intrigue was now showing in Hopper's eyes. "Okay Will, talk."

"Mom, you remember that Summer when we were nine and Mike

jumped out of that tree and broke his leg?"

"Jumped?" asked Joyce. "I thought he fell..."

"R-right. Fell, that's what I meant, I'm just a little frazzled right now," Will stammered in reply. "Anyways, his right leg supposedly had this permanent line on it from where the bone healed, but this x-ray doesn't show it, which means someone could've staged the body you found, and not known about this particular detail."

Joyce looked stunned, either at the revelation or that fact that it had been Will that put it together, but Hopper was already up on his feet, taking the x-ray from Will's hands. "I'm going to make a few calls and try and get this confirmed." He pushed his way by a bleary-eyed El and Jonathan who had been awoken by all the hubbub.

"I should go make some coffee," Joyce said, slipping on a robe over her nightgown. "Will, you can fill these two in, but please try not to get your hopes up until Jim confirms."

Telling them that was useless though, as Will could already see their eyes glittering with hope. He had just finished his explanation and reasoning when Hopper came back in. "I called down to the hospital to have them dig up Mike's medical records, and you were right Will, that body is not Mike's. However," he said, holding up a hand to cut short any premature celebration. "just because that body isn't Mike doesn't mean that he's alive. We don't know anything for sure yet."

Three pairs of eyes looked at Will, expecting him to throw a fit insisting that Mike was alive, and going off on anyone that said otherwise. And sure, he felt that way deep down. But instead of voicing it, he just let out a small huff. "Listen, a couple of hours ago, I was sure that my best friend was gone forever. So being unsure of his current condition is like a huge upgrade. I'll take what I can get at this point."

"Alright kid," Hopper smiled at him, "that's exactly how I feel. Now, there's work to do, we're going to have to form another search party, though I'm not exactly sure where to look now. Jonathan, your mom is asking for your help in the kitchen making breakfast. I don't think anyone is getting anymore sleep, so the least we can do is get a good

meal in us."

"Sure thing," he replied, heading out. Hopper was about to follow when Will spoke up.

"There's one thing I'm not sure about...why couldn't you find Mike before if he's still alive, El?"

She looked at him concerned, clearly feeling the same way. "I'm not sure," she admitted.

"What if...," Will started, "what if we assume the people that took Mike are related to the same group of bad people from before. The ones from Hawkins Lab."

"Okay, that makes sense," Hopper nodded.

"Well, they created El's powers...so what if they have a way of blocking them? Like, some sort of force field or something?"

A wry smile made its way to Hopper's face, probably at the fact that Will would of course come up with a Sci-Fi explanation to their situation. Still though...

"I don't know about a force field, but it's certainly not out of the realm of possibility that they have some sort of material that might block El's powers. That would explain why she can't find him, but I'm not sure that would help us...unless..." he turned to Eleven, "El, Do you think that you could try to search specific areas of the town instead of looking for a certain person? That way, if you tried to search somewhere and were unable to, we might have a clue of where to look."

El thought about it carefully before answering. She hadn't quite tried to use her powers in that manner before, but the look of hope on Will's face convinced her to give it a try. "I can attempt it, but I'm not sure it will work. I need a map of the town though."

"There's one in Hopper's bag, I'll get it!" Will said excitedly before catching the look on Hopper's face. "Um, I mean, I-"

"Fine, go get it," Hopper sighed in resignation. "I've got some more

calls to make to get things going, so I'll leave you guys to it."

He ran and got the map and brought it back to El's room where he spread it across the floor. She sat down cross-legged in front of it, preparing to put the blindfold over her eyes. But before she could, Will sat down next to her and gently grabbed her hand.

"El, wait," he said. His step-sister arched a questioning eyebrow at him as he took a deep breath. They hadn't really talked much since Mike had been thought dead...so he hadn't really had a chance to do this. "The other night...what I said on the walkie-talkies...that was way out of line, and I'm so, so sorry."

"It's okay Will, I forgive you."

"No, it's not okay," he said forcefully, trying to steady his voice. "You're one of the most important people in the world to me, and I said something that I knew would hurt you just because I was upset and -"

Eleven cut him off, placing both of her hands on his own. "Not okay," she agreed before breaking out into a small smile. "But I forgive you anyways."

Will surged forward, pulling the girl into a tight hug. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Of course," she grinned, separating herself. "Now...let's find Mike."

He nodded, a determined look coming on his face as El adjusted the blindfold over her eyes. As he sat and waited quietly for her to begin, his mind drifted, and he could swear he could almost hear Mike's voice back from when they were nine.

*"You're my best friend...I'll always save you."*

"Not this time Mike," Will thought to himself. "This time it's my turn."

---

By the time breakfast was ready, El thought she might have found something. She explained her theory as the five of them were

munching on waffles and sausages.

"I did a sweep of the entire town and wasn't able to find anything weird," she said. "So, I started looking underground...just in case Mike really was..."

"But he wasn't," Will smiled. "Tell 'em what you found."

"Well, I remembered when I was being held at the lab, a lot of the rooms were underground, so I searched there. I was able to access all of the rooms I knew about from my time there, but when I went deeper underground, there was something blocking me from seeing what was there."

"That must be it then, right?" Joyce asked hopefully.

Hopper rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "It seems likely...but that presents another problem. You see, we have searched that whole building before top to bottom, and found nothing lower than the rooms that Eleven were held in, which means this new place must have a separate entrance, which makes sense and is a smart move on their part."

"That just means we have to find the other entrance right?" Jonathan asked, a little puzzled.

"I wish it were that easy. You see, right now we have the advantage. The people holding Mike don't know that we know the body was a fake. So they're not in a hurry to do anything. But if they see us sniffing around again, it might set them off, make them do something drastic."

It was taking every ounce of self-control in Will's body to stop himself from jumping up and starting his own search that very moment. But he knew that would ultimately lead to him being cut out of any search parties, so instead he managed to rein his emotions in. "So, what's the plan then?" he asked calmly.

Hopper raised an eyebrow at him, clearly surprised and a little impressed. "Well, the safest bet is to stake out the lab and wait for one of his captors to come out. They must be coming out for supplies

every now and then. The only problem with that is, I don't really have the manpower to surround such a large building."

As if in answer to his statement, a knock came on the door. Joyce quickly got up to open it to reveal Steve, Nancy, Dustin, Lucas, and Max.

"Ummm, so I kinda figured we might need help, so I might've called for reinforcements," Will said innocently.

---

Mike's head snapped back as another blow caught him in the face, only to loll back forward as his chin came to rest on this chest. Initially he was so damn glad to get off of that table, even when they roughly tied his arms behind the back of the chair he was now seated on, with no regard to his left arm which he was pretty sure was broken. But now after hours of being beaten, he was beginning to long to be back on the table.

Dr. Green had called this the 'final phase' of conditioning, and that if Mike didn't respond, they would simply dispose of him and pick up and start over somewhere else. Dr. Schneider had been doing all of the actual physical abuse. Dr. Green was apparently not the type to get his hands dirty.

"Oomph."

Mike grunted as the short man's fist collided with his ribs. He had been alternating punches to the body with open handed blows to the face. His cheeks and eyes felt puffy, and he could feel the blood trickling down from his likely broken nose. There was blood in his mouth too, the coppery taste overpowering everything else. And every time he tried to take a deep breath, his ribs would scream out in pain.

"Alright, that's enough," Dr. Green said, stepping in at last.

He grabbed a fistful of Mike's hair, forcing the boy to look up at him. "Still there," he said. "That stubborn rebellious look in his eye. Maybe this one was just too strong-willed. We should've grabbed that Byers



kid instead, he's probably weak and scared enough for this to work."

Something red and hot began bubbling somewhere within Mike. Will *wasn't* weak, and it made him angry any time someone said that he was, even when Will said it himself. Will was strong and brave, he just didn't know it. But hearing this coward in front of him say those things about Will, with that smug smirk on his face, was too much for Mike to bear. He didn't really have a lot of recourse though, so he did the only thing he could think of - he spit a huge glob of blood and saliva right in the man's face. The satisfaction he felt at seeing his spit missile hit home and leave a wet glistening streak down his captor's cheek was fleeting though, as in the next moment Dr. Green hit him with a backhand to the side of his face so hard that it knocked him and the chair over sideways.

"You know what, to hell with this, it was never going to work," Dr. Green said, his cool demeanor suddenly all gone. "I think it's time for our exit plan, Dr. Schneider. Pick this little shit back up."

Mike's head was still ringing from the blow as Dr. Schneider righted him. He saw Dr. Green angrily wiping his cheek off before walking over to a cabinet filled with medical supplies and removing a bag of fluids, very much like the one that his IV was attached to now. There were a couple of stark differences though - instead of being clear, the liquid in this bag was a nasty looking neon green, and it had a black skull and crossbones on its label.

"Shit, that doesn't look promising," Mike thought to himself. He watched the taller man quickly change out the bags before turning back to him with a grin.

"Now, you might be wondering what this is. I won't bore you with the actual chemical compound and what's in it. All you really need to know is once it enters your veins, you have about ten minutes to live, but with the amount of pain and agony this stuff causes as you die, it'll feel more like ten hours I'm sure. By the time it's over, you'll be begging for us to put you out of your misery. And it all starts now, with the press of this button."

Mike watched as the man took a remote control device out of his pocket, one that apparently controlled the IV machine. As his thumb

hovered over the button, Mike braced himself for the worst, but just as it looked as if his thumb was about to press down, Dr. Schneider intervened.

"Dr. Green, I was just thinking..."

"What?" Dr. Green snapped, clearly a little annoyed at being interrupted. "Don't tell me you don't wanna go through with killing this brat?"

Mike's hope flickered briefly, but was quickly doused by the evil looking grin that came over Dr. Schneider's face. "I think you know me better than that, my friend. It's just that, I was feeling rather hungry, and thought that maybe I could go get us something to eat while we watch young Wheeler suffer. Dinner and a show, if you will."

Dr. Green's face soon mirrored that of his cohort as a smile crept across his own face. "Have I ever told you that you have a horrid demeanor, Dr. Schneider? I love it. Yes, go ahead on out and get us something. I'll pack things up here. We'll eat, have our show, and then leave this crummy town behind us."

"Very good," Dr. Schneider agreed, heading towards the door. "I'll return soon. Don't start without me...I want to see every second of it." With one last leer, he was gone, and Mike was left to wonder if it would've been better if they had just pressed the damn button and gotten it over with.

---

Will shifted uncomfortably from his spot behind a large tree about 80 feet outside the fence line of the defunct Hawkins Laboratories. What had started out as a hopeful stakeout nine hours ago had long since turned into a slog. Hopper had warned them it wouldn't be easy though, and Will wasn't going to lose heart - Mike was counting on him.

After Nancy, Steve, and the rest of the Party had arrived at the Byers household, begging to help, Hopper had relented. He didn't really have a choice, as he couldn't let too many other people help now that

the case was beginning to involve Hawkins Lab again. He couldn't risk people asking too many questions and digging into El's background. So he had laid down some ground rules.

"Alright, we're going to take up positions all around the facility, about a quarter-mile apart from each other. That should give us enough coverage to surround the place. We'll all have walkies, but radio silence should be strictly maintained unless it's an emergency, or you see something suspicious. At that point, do not make any moves, wait for me to arrive. Everyone clear?"

A chorus of nods and assurances had greeted him, so after making sure everyone was properly supplied and geared up, he personally deployed each of them to their spots before taking up his own position. By 10a.m. they were all in position, and had stayed there for the most part, until now. Jonathan was acting as a rover, rotating throughout the various positions so that everyone could take a bathroom break, or get something to eat. Will had refused each time, saying he was fine where he was, not wanting to risk the chance of not being there if something happened.

But even Will had his limits. The next time Jonathan came to his position, he would take a break, he told himself. A short break. He glanced at his watch seeing it was nearly 7p.m. Dusk was falling and the dwindling light would only make their job tougher. He glanced to his left and right, where he knew Steve and Eleven were positioned, respectively, even though he couldn't spot them. He let his eyes roam idly until they fell on the stone structure that was halfway between his and El's position. Hopper said it was just a storage shed that had already been checked out during the initial raid of the lab, and nothing was found there. Will suspected that's why Hopper had chosen to put him and Eleven in these very spots, as he thought it was probably out of harm's way. So to say Will was surprised when he saw signs of movement coming from the structure would be an understatement.

"Will here. We've got action," the boy said softly into the walkie. "Lone figure coming out of the storage shed to my right."

"I've got eyes on it too," Eleven confirmed. The man was looking around furtively before apparently deciding the coast was clear and

exiting the building fully.

"Okay, neither of you move until I get there, understand? I'm on my way," Hopper commanded. But Will knew he couldn't wait. Hopper was to Steve's left, which meant he was half a mile away from Will. By the time he got there, the guy could be gone. He had to at least buy them some time.

"Sorry Hopper, I have to stall him at least."

"I'll help," El said.

"That wasn't the deal. Hey! Hey, answer me! Shit, Steve, get over there! Everyone else hold position in case...."

Will didn't hear what else was said as the conversation faded into nothingness as he raced forward, leaving his walkie where it was.

"Hold on, Mike," he muttered. "Here I come."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

We are heading to a conclusion folks! Two or three more chapters of this I'm thinking. But, if you're enjoying my writing, I actually have another Byler fic I'm working on and hoping to post the first chapter of later tonight or tomorrow, so be on the lookout for that! Kudos/comments are greatly appreciated. Thanks for reading!

## 6. Chapter 6

Will really had no plan. No plan at all as he rushed headlong towards the unsuspecting man in front of him. Needless to say the man wasn't expecting to look up and see his path being blocked by a small, slender, yet determined looking boy, so Will had the momentary advantage. He decided to go with the straightforward method.

"Where's my friend?!" he demanded, huffing slightly from his brief run.

The individual before was a shorter, balding man, wearing a white lab coat, wearing such a stunned expression that Will didn't know if he had comprehended the question. But the man quickly recovered, looking carefully around before ascertaining Will was alone. "I'm sorry young man, I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," he said in a mocking tone and slightly accented voice.

"Yes you do. Where is Mike? Give him back....please give him back." Will immediately regretted letting the weakness creep into his voice as the man's expression grew even more confident.

"I know you. You're the Byers kid. I'm surprised your mother lets you out in the dark woods alone anymore after what happened last time," he said with a sneer, his hand disappearing into his pocket. But whether he was reaching for a weapon, a communication device, or a stick of gum, he never got that far as his movements suddenly halted and his face contorted in a grimace of pain.

"Who said he was alone?" came Eleven's voice from behind the man. She stepped into view, a thin trickle of blood running from her nose as she used her powers to wrench the man's arm up behind him in a hammerlock, leading him back across the short distance to the shed. "Now I believe he asked you a question. Where is Mike?"

Will looked inside the structure hopefully, but it looked normal to his eyes, with the door being the only exit. The man's expression had changed from superior to wheedling in a matter of seconds. "A-as I was just telling this young man, I don't know anyone named Mike. You're making a mist- AHFFF!" he broke off in a cry of pain as El

applied more pressure.

"If you plan on using that arm at any point in the future," Will said, "I think you better tell us what we want to know."

"Okay, okay, please," he choked out. "There is a secret switch, two feet to the right of the door on the inside, right at the height of the door handle."

Will and El exchanged a look and a silent conversation before Will nodded. "You better not be lying," he said. He stepped inside and carefully felt along the length of the wall, pressing until a portion of it gave way under his hand, and a section of the floor in the back corner whooshed open.

"You found it!" Eleven said softly. They both turned as someone came crashing through the trees to their location. Steve Harrington stopped short, clearly a little impressed at the sight before him.

"Well shit, I guess you guys didn't need me after all," he said, letting his nail-embroidered baseball bat fall down to his side.

"Yes we do, Steve," Will said. "Watch this guy while we go find Mike."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Steve said, easily kicking the man's leg out from under him so he landed flat on his back with a grunt. He prodded him with a toe in the ribs until he rolled over onto his stomach before planting a shoe right into the small of his back. "I mean, Hopper's probably only a minute behind, and this guy might have a partner."

"I know," Will said grimly as Eleven grabbed his hand and pulled him into the shed. "And that's another minute they're doing who knows what to Mike. Just tell him where we went."

"Fuck....okay, but be careful!"

Will gave a grim salute, and followed Eleven down into the dark hole. She used her flashlight to reveal a gently sloping ramp. The only other thing in view was a huge stone column which took up the whole middle of the area, with the ramp wrapping down around it in a spiral shape. The dank, damp scent of underground assaulted Will's

nostrils as the pair pressed forward slowly, ever downward, circling the column over and over. After what seemed like forever, it began to grow brighter, as fluorescent lights began to illuminate the area ahead. They could see the end of the ramp now, as it leveled off, and sounds of movement became clear from up ahead.

"Okay, this is it, you ready?" Eleven whispered back over her shoulder. But before Will could respond, he felt a hand clamp over his mouth from behind. He resisted every urge to scream as he whirled around to see Hopper standing there with a finger on his lips. Will nodded and forced his heart back down out of his throat. He could see the sheriff was furious, but all he said was, "Both of you behind me, follow my lead."

The pair meekly nodded and waited until Hopper drew his gun and took the lead. The hallway ahead of them continued in a circular shape as had the ramp above them. Will realized this whole underground was one big circle, and the ground floor was no different. A door way came into view on their left, leading directly into the center stone column they had been following all the way down. The hallway continued on past the door, still curving, but they could hear signs of life now. This was the doorway they wanted.

Hopper edged forward carefully sticking his head in the doorway, Eleven was right behind him, and apparently whatever she saw made her gasp and surge forward. "Mike!" she screamed, before another male voice jumped in and stopped her.

"Don't move another muscle, or Mr. Wheeler here is a dead man," it said coldly. Will couldn't see anything, Hopper and Eleven were taking up all of the doorway. That proved to be a blessing in disguise, because the owner of the voice apparently hadn't spotted him either, as his next sentence proved. "Now, both of you enter nice and slow, and just know one press of this button in my hand, and it's goodbye for your friend here."

"Okay pal, take it easy," Hopper replied calmly, obviously used to dealing with high leverage situations such as this. Will didn't know if he should run back for more help or what, but he suddenly saw Hopper's non-gun hand behind his back, pointing his finger further on down the hallway.

"He wants me to continue on," Will thought, confused. But he didn't question it; he knew he didn't have the time. So he ducked down and quickly skirted past, using the pair in front of him as a screen. He took a quick peek under Eleven's arm and got a clear view of the room for a second, and what he saw made him sick. Mike was seated in the middle of the room, shirtless, bloody, and tied to a chair. And the expression on his face, even though Will only saw it for an instant, was just so scared that Will knew it would be burned into his memory forever. And he would do whatever it took to wipe that expression from his face.

Will hadn't gathered much of an impression of the man standing behind Mike, as he was too focused on his best friend, but he did capture the reason Hopper had urged him on, as behind Mike and his captor was a second doorway. If logic followed, this curved hallway should reach the other side of that round room, and Will would be able to slip in behind the bad guy. What was he going to do when he got there? No fucking clue, but he hoped something good would come to mind. He ran along the hall as quickly as he could without making noise, and just as he had hoped, came to the other doorway in short order. He craned his head around and saw the enemy's focus was still on Hopper and El in front of him. They had now entered the room, standing right by their door.

Will caught Hopper's eyes and gave a nod. The sheriff didn't dare to return the sign in anyway, lest Will be discovered and their advantage lost, but instead said, "So you mean to tell me, Dr. Green, that unless we give into your demands and let you leave, you'll press that button in your hand and send that nasty looking fluid into Mike, and there will be no rescuing him after that?"

Will's lips curled into a small smile, despite their desperate situation. He knew Hopper had repeated those words for his benefit, to tell him what he missed while he was running along the hall.

"Uh, yeah, you dumb hick sheriff, that's what I just said. God, I wonder how someone like you and a bunch of idiot kids managed to take down our whole operation, honestly. I'm almost embarrassed for all of us. You're a disgrace as a law officer and - ah, ah, ah, don't even think about it girl," he said, turning to Eleven. "I know who you are. Just because your hair has gotten longer and you've grown up a little



bit doesn't make you a normal kid. You'll always just be subject number 011 to me, and if I see you so much as look at me too intensely, I will not hesitate to press this button. You trust your powers well enough to risk your boyfriend's life?"

All this time the man was talking, Will was trying to formulate a plan. His eyes ran from the bag of green liquid that was hanging on the IV stand. Will had of course been in his share of hospitals and had gotten more IVs than he cared to remember. He knew the machines basically regulated the flow of the drugs into one's system, so if he could disable the machine....

And that was when he spotted it - the black power cord running from the machine to an outlet in the wall, just ten feet from the entryway he was standing at. He knew it was risky, but he also knew it was the only plan he had. He just had to hope that the machine had no battery backup, or they were fucked. He crept forward quietly, entering the room with slow, careful steps as he heard Hopper bartering with the man, trying to keep his attention.

"Whatever you want man, money, transportation, whatever. We can all walk away from here alive," the sheriff said.

"Oh, I know I'll get what I want alright," he sneered. "First, you're going to release my colleague, then we can talk about more specific demands."

By this time Will had reached the plug, and bent down to gently wiggle it out of the wall. For a split second, he held his breath until he saw the numbers and the blinking lights on the machine go dim, and then off completely. He exhaled and stood back up as he gave a thumbs up to Hopper and Eleven. The sheriff immediately stopped his placating act and fixed the man ahead of him with a cold stare. Eleven looked downright *enraged* as the two began to advance.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Dr. Green asked nervously. "You don't wanna call my bluff, trust me, I will press this thing."

The pair continued forward though, until they were nearly upon him. "FINE!! YOU DID THIS YOURSELF THOUGH!!" he shrieked as he pressed down with his thumb. Will could see Mike visibly flinch as he

expected his life to end. But nothing happened. The doctor pressed the button over and over with no results before turning to look at the powered down machine. "NOOOO. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE -"

It was at that moment he finally noticed Will, who simply grinned smugly and waved while holding the unplugged cord aloft. "Why you little -" he began, trying to lunge at Will, only to be spun around roughly by the shoulder as a fist crashed into his nose, sending him flying backwards.

"Have a seat, doctor," Hopper said, shaking his hand a bit from the impact as El and Will rushed towards their friend.

"Mike! Are you okay!?" Will asked breathlessly, coming up from behind him.

"Will? Is that you?" Mike asked trying to crane his neck.

"Yes, just sit still, I'll have you out in a second," Will replied. The IV was carefully removed from Mike's arm before Will went to work trying to untie his bonds. As he tugged at a particularly difficult knot, Mike hissed in pain. "Mike...did I hurt you? What's wrong?"

"No...it's just, I think they broke my arm - the left one."

Will felt rage burning through his entire body, but before he could do or say anything Eleven beat him to it as she turned to the fallen Dr. Green with an outstretched hand, a murderous look in her eye.

"El, no!" Hopper yelled, but could do nothing but watch as the man got lifted off the ground and slammed forcefully into the concrete wall as Eleven let out a shriek of anger. He grunted in pain as she drew him back and was about to slam him again when Hopper's voice finally seemed to get through to her. "El....don't do this."

"But he was going to KILL Mike!" she screamed, watching as the man twisted in midair, trying desperately to get away. Will stood quietly, not really caring at the moment if the man died or not.

"I know...but we're better than they are. Don't let them turn you into what they wanted you to be...you're not a killer, El."

The two of them locked eyes for what seemed like forever before Eleven finally let the man fall back down to the floor. But just as he was getting his breath back, she gave one final twist of her head and a sharp crack was heard as Dr. Green began writhing on the ground in pain clutching his arm. "AAAAH, she broke it! That little freak broke my arm!!"

"Not a killer," she said softly to Hopper as she turned back to Will and Mike. The sheriff looked exasperated, but just sighed and handed Will a sharp knife to more easily free Mike.

"You guys saved me," Mike said, smiling weakly as Will cut the bonds away quickly,

"It was mostly Will," Eleven put in, smiling brightly. "He wouldn't give up on you, no matter what anyone said. He was the one that found out you were still alive, and came up with this plan to save you. And then you saw his heroic actions down here."

"El," Will muttered in protest. He was blushing madly by this point as Mike cautiously stood to his feet and turned to face him, a look of wonderment in his eyes.

"Will...I don't know what to say. Thank you so -"

"Backup should be on the way soon," Hopper said as he came over to join the group, unintentionally cutting off their conversation. He had just finished cuffing Dr. Green's good arm to a metal pole, ensuring he wouldn't be going anywhere until he was supposed to. "I've radioed up, and there should be paramedics by the time you reach topside."

"Here," Will said, whipping off his jacket without a thought and covering the shirtless boy. He helped him put his good arm through the right sleeve, while simply letting the other side hang over his shoulder, despite Mike's weak protests.

"Will, I'm all gross and grimy. I'm gonna get your jacket all dirty."

"If you only knew how little I cared about that right now," Will laughed, shaking his head.

"Can you walk, kid?" Hopper asked.

"I...I think so," Mike replied, taking a few wobbly steps.

"Whoa there," the Sheriff said. "Maybe I should take you up. Eleven, you wanna guard this guy? I doubt he's going to try anything, but -"

"I can get Mike up top," Will said suddenly stepping forward. "Here Mike, lean on me," he offered, putting the boy's good arm around his shoulders.

"Will, he's quite a bit bigger than you," Hopper warned.

"I got him," Will replied stubbornly, as the pair took a few slow paces forward.

"Will, just let me -"

"I said I got him!" Will snapped a little more viciously than he meant, pulling Mike closer and taking on all of his weight.

Mike waved Hopper off and then turned to smile warmly down at Will.

"Yeah," he agreed softly, "you've got me."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Yay, Mike is safe! The story isn't over yet, but that was the climax of the more action-y part of this fic, so feedback/thoughts are appreciated! Probably one more chapter next week and then maybe an epilogue after that.

## 7. Chapter 7

Mike was hospitalized for a few days before being allowed back home to finish recuperating. His friends had only been allowed to visit the hospital once, and only for ten minutes, as the doctor was adamant Mike get enough rest to recover from his trying ordeal. By the time Saturday rolled around, Will was going crazy wondering when Mike's mom would let them see Mike again. Finally Joyce took it upon herself to call Karen, if Will promised to just settle down a bit.

"Hi Karen, this is Joyce. We're just wondering how Mike is recovering....uh-huh....uh-huh....oh, good! That's great to hear. So, listen, I was also calling because Will was wondering if you needed any help taking care of Mike....Yes, he knows Mike is in no shape to play around, he's just worried and wants to help....Oh? Yeah, that's perfect....Yes, Will would love to....okay. I'll drop him off in 20."

Will, who had been listening in, was practically giddy with excitement by the time Joyce hung up. "She said yes!?"

Joyce looked at her son with amusement before answering. "Yes, Karen actually needs to go to the grocery store, but doesn't want to leave Mike there alone, so I volunteered you to help. But NO horseplay, young man. Mike is still recovering."

"Oh my god, thank you, thank you, thank you, I promise. I love you so much," Will bubbled. He managed to contain himself just enough to avoid sprinting to the car - though he was still bouncing with impatience at the passenger door as he waited for his mom to unlock it.

The drive seemed to take longer than ever before, a tense silence permeating the car, an obvious but unasked question hanging in the air. Finally Joyce was unable to stand it anymore. "Um, Honey, are you....are you planning to talk to Mike about...well...you know..."

Yes, Will did know exactly what she meant. But he had no fucking idea if today was the day he was going to confess his feelings to Mike Wheeler or not. He remembered back to when he thought Mike was

dead, begging for the gods to give him just one more chance to tell Mike the truth about how he felt. But now that that chance was actually here in front of him? He was still fucking terrified of finding out the answer.

"I'm not sure," he answered finally, a faint blush painting his cheeks. "I'm not really planning on it, you know? I just got...I mean, we just got him back. I don't want to rush into anything. "

"Okay. Well, if it does come up...and he doesn't feel the same way...just don't take it too hard, okay?"

The car had now pulled up to the curb outside the Wheeler residence.

"You know mom," Will said rolling his eyes a bit trying to dispel some of the tension, "you don't have to worry about me so much *all* the time."

"I know that," she replied, huffing out a small laugh, relenting only partly. "It's just....this is kind of a big deal."

Will got out of the car, shutting the door behind him before leaning back in through the open window. "I lived in a world for two days where I thought he was dead, mom. As long he doesn't hate me...as long as this doesn't ruin our friendship...then I'll be just fine."

"Well," Joyce replied, her eyes shimmering, "you'll be just fine then. Because I think we both know Mike isn't going to hate you, no matter what."

The boy smiled and nodded in response, 99 percent sure that his mom was right. "Okay, get in there then. Good luck...you know, if it does come up."

Will grinned in thanks, and headed up the familiar driveway, hearing his mom pull away behind him. His knock at the door was answered swiftly by Karen Wheeler, who looked frazzled and exhausted, but a little bit of life seemed to come to her face when she saw Will.

"Will! Thank you so much for coming," she said, moving aside to let him in. "I've had my hands full here. Nancy had to go back to school and Ted's...well, being Ted. I have my sister looking after Holly for a

few days, but I still would rather not leave Michael here alone."

"Of course, Mrs. Wheeler, I don't mind at all," Will smiled.

"Honestly, Michael has been asking about you a lot too. I thought he might've been itching to see that girlfriend of his, but you're the one he's been asking for."

The gears started turning in Will's head, as he fought to keep the blush from his cheeks. "Well, he probably doesn't want her to see him all beat up and what not. Got his macho image to maintain," Will said light-heartedly. Mrs. Wheeler laughed at that, clearly not buying the idea of Mike being macho.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm glad you're here." As the boy turned down towards the basement, Karen placed a hand on his elbow. "Will...there's one more thing. I just wanted to say thanks. Without you we wouldn't have Michael back at all. We thought we'd lost him. So really, thank you."

Before Will could respond, Karen Wheeler, in a rare show of emotion, stepped forward and embraced Will into a tight hug. She let go as quickly as she initiated it, and Will flashed her a goofy smile.

"It was my pleasure, really. I owed him this one, trust me."

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Will walked slowly down the stairs to the Wheeler basement as he had so many times before. But this time was different. Different because at one point, he had thought he would never have the occasion to walk down these steps again. After all, with Mike dead, why would he have? But as he made it to the bottom, and saw a familiar profile sitting on the couch, he silently thanked the powers that be that he was in this position once more.

"Byers! Hey!" Mike shouted when he finally noticed him, his face lighting up with a huge smile. The swelling on his face had mostly subsided, but there was still some residual bruising left around his eyes, and the way he gingerly turned to face Will told him that his ribs weren't fully healed yet either. His left arm was casted up to his

bicep, still sporting the signatures that the Party had been allowed to draw during their lone hospital visit.

"Hey yourself, Wheeler," Will shot back with his own smile. But he must've spent too long looking wistfully at Mike's injuries.

"Don't give me the pity look please, Will. I get enough of that from my mom." It was meant as a joke, but Will could tell from the underlying tone that there was more than a morsel of truth in there.

"Not a pity look," Will clarified, walking over to stand beside the couch. "Just worried a little. I'm over here to help out, after all."

"I don't need help, I'm not a baby," Mike muttered sullenly. "I only agreed to let you 'watch me' because I wanted to hang out with you....ya know, like normal."

"I know you're not a baby, and we're going to hang out, don't worry," Will said, his eyes shining fondly. "Is there anything I can get you though?"

"Yeah," Mike growled a little. "You can get me Will Byers sitting down over here on the couch next to me."

Will snorted a laugh as he moved over to acquiesce. "Okay, okay, I'm com-"

As soon as he was close enough, his friend reached out and grabbed him with a surprising amount of strength using his good arm, and pulled him down into a crushing Mike Wheeler hug. Will was in a bit of an awkward position, half standing, half kneeling on the couch, trying his best not to fall completely forward and crush his still injured friend. "Mike...what -"

"I never got to properly thank you yet, Will," Mike began, still not letting go, his face partially buried in Will's chest. "You saved me man...you saved my *life*. Hopper told me everything you did for me. How you figured out I was still alive, when everyone else had given up. I owe you everything. So...just thank you, Will. Thank you for saving me."

Will had managed to regain his balance sufficiently by this point to



wrap his arms gently around his friend's neck and return his embrace. "Of course, Mike, you're my best friend," Will replied softly, leaning his head down until it rested on Mike's. "I'll always save you." They stayed just like that for a few moments, Will enjoying the closeness as he inhaled the scent of Mike's shampoo. He was pulled roughly from his trance though as he noticed his friend sobbing into his chest.

"Hey, hey now," Will said, disentangling himself enough to look down at his friend. "What's going on?"

"God, I'm sorry," Mike said, finally letting go of Will so he could rub the tears from his face. "I said I wasn't a baby, yet here I am crying like one."

Will frowned as he took a seat on the couch next to Mike. "Crying doesn't make you a baby, Mike. You went through a very traumatic experience." He tried to choose his words carefully. He knew exactly the type of thing Mike was going through, and that it wasn't going to get easier any time soon. "So, this is going to sound cliché, but you know how everyone says it helps to talk about it? Well it actually does. As much as you might not want to, as much as you might wanna just bury it deep inside and hope it goes away, you need to find someone you trust to talk to about this, preferably a professional."

The dark-haired boy sniffled, finally having composed himself. "Yeah, that's part of the reason I wanted you to come over actually."

"What? Me!?"

"Well of course you, dork. Who's more of an expert than someone that's gone through it already? And who do I trust in this world more than you?"

"Mike, I don't know if..."

"Please Will...I really need to get this out." Mike looked so helpless that Will could only nod in agreement.

"Alright Mike....go ahead."

Mike ran his good hand through his tousled hair and sighed, as if

debating where to exactly begin. "Well, I'll just start by saying you're amazing."

Well, he hadn't been expecting *that*. Will felt his face get hot as he tried to splutter out a response, but Mike saved him the trouble. "Don't try to say you aren't. Like...I knew what you went through was hard. But 'hard' doesn't even do it justice. I was alone Will...so alone. All by myself, wondering if anyone was even looking for me still, thinking that it would just be better if I just...died. And that was only after like three days, and still in this dimension. You survived a whole week in the god damn Upside Down with a demogorgon after you."

The younger boy cleared his throat, a bit uncomfortable with all of the praise. "Thank you Mike, but our situations were quite a bit different. I was running and hiding for most of my time. You were actively being tortured. Besides, this isn't about me right now, this is about you. Maybe you could just...tell me what you're feeling."

The dark-haired boy nodded, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "I'm just scared Will," he said simply. "I'm scared all the fucking time. I haven't even been outside since coming back from the hospital. I've been locked inside, safe in my own home, with near constant supervision...and I'm still scared. I can barely sleep because of the nightmares. The ones where no one rescues me, and the torture just goes on forever. How do you do it Will? After everything you went through, how do you still manage to...live?"

It all sounded so familiar to Will. The apprehension, the nervousness, the distrust of nearly everything. He had gone through it all himself, and was in fact still living with some of it. The fact that he had to see one of the most important people in his life suffering through the same thing made him nauseous. But there was no time for that now. He had to be strong, for Mike.

"It wasn't easy Mike, you know that. You saw what I was like in the years following the shadow monster. Really all you can do is just try to get through one day at a time," Will said, full of nerves as he slowly extended an arm to wrap it around his friend's shoulders. "And most importantly don't be afraid to lean on the ones who love you. We all *want* to help...so just never feel like you're being a burden. I

think that was the hardest part for me to accept. But it's true. We're not just saying it, we're not doing it out of obligation...we're doing it because we love you."

Will was staring straight forward during his speech, not quite having it in him to make such intimate eye contact, so he felt more than he saw the tension began to slowly work its way out of Mike's body. He allowed himself to melt into Will just a little bit, resting his head on the younger boy's shoulder. They sat there in comfortable silence for a few minutes until Mike spoke again.

"This is the best I've felt since being rescued," he admitted. "I knew I was right to trust you with this."

Will simply smiled to himself, and gave Mike's shoulder another reassuring squeeze as he came to his own decision - this definitely wasn't the time to share his feelings with Mike. Right now, Mike needed his best friend, not a lot of additional stress and potential weirdness to add to what he was already going through. Will had waited this long....he could wait a little longer.

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When Karen Wheeler returned a few hours later and walked down to the basement, she was greeted by the soft glow of the television and a sound she hadn't heard in a long while - Mike laughing. He and Will were sitting on the couch next to each other, watching some dumb movie, practically doubled over with laughter. She allowed herself to watch for a few moments before making her presence known.

"Well, you two certainly seem to be enjoying yourselves," she commented, a playful smile on her face.

"Oh, hi Mrs. Wheeler," Will said brightly. "Were you able to get everything you needed from the store?"

"I was, Will. Thanks for asking."

"Moooom," Mike broke in with a slightly whiny voice. "Will doesn't have to go home yet does he? We were just starting to have fun."

Mike hadn't shown any sort of joy like this since she'd brought him

back from the hospital, and she certainly didn't want to take away its source so soon. "If Will would like to stay for dinner, he certainly can."

Mike looked at Will hopefully, causing the boy to grin. "Sure Mrs. Wheeler, that would be great. Thank you."

"No Will, thank *you*. I'll call your mother and tell her you're staying."

Mike let out a contented sigh and settled back into the couch as he heard the basement door close behind his mother. He nudged Will with his elbow a bit to get his attention. "Hey, I didn't mean to pressure you into staying you know. You don't have to if you don't want."

"Of course I want to doofus, don't be ridiculous," Will replied with an eye roll.

"Good. 'Cause I really like having you around."

Will wasn't really sure what it was - the words themselves were innocuous enough. Maybe a bit mushy, but nothing that one close friend wouldn't say to another. But the tone...something about the way Mike said it...completely sucked all of the air out of the room. The sound of the movie played on in the background, all but forgotten now. Will was trying to figure out what to say, how to respond, when Mike thankfully moved on to another topic.

"I....um....I broke up with El, you know."

"Yeah, she, uh, she told me," Will responded. This subject wouldn't have been his first choice for conversation, but if Mike needed someone to talk to about this, then dammit, that's what he was there for.

"I see," Mike laughed nervously. "I thought she might. Did she say anything about why?"

"No, not really," Will answered honestly. "Just that it was mutual."

Mike nodded sadly, and the silence stretched on for so long that for a moment Will thought the conversation would end right there. But

suddenly Mike blurted. "It's my fault....I realized I liked someone else."

And just like that, before he knew it, Will Byers' chance was gone. Mike already liked someone else, before Will could even tell him how he felt. Will never had a real chance with him. He was angriest at himself for even allowing his mind to think that he ever did. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"Oh?" That's all Will trusted himself to say aloud at the moment. Luckily for him, it seemed that Mike wanted to continue talking.

"Yeah, it's weird you know? It's just one of those things that seemed to hit me all of the sudden, but also seemed like it's been there for awhile," he sighed heavily. "But...I'm not even sure they'll like me back. I don't know what to do. I'm afraid of getting rejected and what that might mean, but I'm also afraid of missing out if I don't go for it." Mike was quiet for a moment before seeming to muster his courage and turn to his friend. "Can you help me out Will? What do you think I should I do?"

Could *Will* help *him*? Will was having a hard time helping himself to breathe right now. What should *Mike* do? The real question was what should *Will* do.

He should jump in and tell Mike about his feelings right now, before this gets too far, right? He deserves to doesn't he? He's earned the right to be a little selfish, just this once, right?

But then he looked back up at Mike, and saw his face so earnest, his eyes so vulnerable. He was trusting Will to help him make a very important decision. Trusting Will more than anyone else in the world....and Will knew he couldn't betray that.

"God dammit," he sighed to himself internally before forcing a smile to his face.

"Listen, I don't know a whole lot about this stuff...but if you like her, you should tell her. If you get rejected, that's something you'll be able to get over, because at least you tried, right? At least then you'll *know*. But if you never try, you'll just live your whole life wondering,

'what if?'"

The advice came tumbling out effortlessly - after all, that was the same advice he had been telling himself for days now. Mike looked a little relieved, but still a bit nervous, so Will reached over to give his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry man...it'll work out. Anyone would be crazy to turn you down. You're kind, funny, loyal....and you probably won't look half bad when your face finishes healing," Will cracked, earning a scoffing laugh from his friend, sufficiently breaking the tension in the room.

"Thanks, Will. That means a lot. And thank you...for the advice. I think that was just what I needed to hear."

"No problem, man. I'm glad I could help. So, um, when do you think you're going to make your move?" he asked, genuinely curious even though his heart was still aching just a bit.

"Soon. Really soon," Mike said, fixing Will with a determined look. "Right now in fact."

"Right now? Like, right right now?" Will asked, clearly confused. "I don't understand are you wanting me to call someone for you, or -"

Suddenly it clicked. Mike's words, the way he was staring at Will, the mix of determination and fear etched plainly on his face could only mean one thing. But...there was no way. This couldn't be happening....could it?

"Mike...what are you saying?" Will asked shakily. He needed to be sure. He needed to *know*...before he said something he couldn't take back.

"Will...the person I like...it's you. I think it's always been you, but I've just recently come to realize it. But how I feel when you're around....it's just different than how I've ever felt with anyone else! And I know it's not normal, and I'm not even sure if you could like a guy like that, and even if you *did* like guys, it might not necessarily be me. I can deal with all of that, if you just wanna be friends, I understand. But just...please don't hate me, I couldn't take losing you as a friend and -"

Whatever Mike Wheeler was going to say next, Will might never know. And he imagined it didn't really matter, because right now his lips were pressed against those of his childhood best friend, his hand gently coming up to caress Mike's slightly bruised cheek. He could actually feel the tension melt out of Mike as the boy slightly adjusted to fix the messy kiss that Will had rushed into, tilting his head to slot their lips more easily together.

It wasn't exactly how Will had imagined it - I mean he didn't have much of anything to go on really. But if you had asked him before this happened what word he would have used to describe his first kiss, *reassuring* would definitely not have been at the top of the list. Hot? Hopefully. Nerve wracking? Probably. Incredibly awkward? Knowing his luck, most definitely.

And yet, as he sat there, Mike's good hand gently cupping the back of his head behind him, and the firm, insistent pressure of slightly chapped lips against his own in front of him, that was the word that came to mind. *Reassuring*. Like he's safe, insulated from the world and all its problems. In this moment nothing could hurt him. Of course, when he first felt Mike's tongue dart out to run across his lower lip, other words started to come to mind.

*Fuuuuuuuck.*

He just *barely* has enough willpower to suppress a moan, which is a good thing, because he doesn't want to die from embarrassment so soon after having his biggest wish come true. They were finally forced to pulled apart due to lack of oxygen, and when Will was able to get his eyes to refocus, he saw that Mike had a goofy grin sprawled across his face. One that was surely mirrored by his own expression.

"So..." Will started, his grin getting impossibly wider as they stared into each other's eyes, "I guess don't need to say it, but...I like you too."

"Yeah, I kinda got that," Mike said softly, leaning forward to rest his forehead against Will's.

Will just closed his eyes and sighed deeply, thinking that he could stay right here in this spot for this rest of his life and die happy. But

he suddenly remembered something that had him sitting back up and digging in his pocket.

"Shit, I completely forgot, I have something for you," he said.

"For me?" Mike asked, a little confused.

"Yeah, for you. Now close your eyes." Will turned a shade of red as Mike quirked a playful eyebrow at his request. "N-not anything like that dummy! Just do it."

"Okay, okay," Mike laughed, "but whatever it is, I don't think it will beat that kiss you just gave me."

"Shut it, Wheeler," Will muttered as he pulled Mike's Triforce necklace out of his pocket and leaned forward to carefully clasp it behind the boys neck. "Alright, you can look."

And so Mike did, and the playful smile disappeared quickly as he stared down at what he thought had been lost forever. "But....you....how...?" he spluttered, trying to get a full question out.

"You told me you were gonna wear that thing every day Mike Wheeler," Will said with a grin. "I'll give you a pass for the last couple days due to extenuating circumstances, but going forward I mean to see that you keep that promise."

The disbelief on Mike's face slowly melted away until he was staring at Will with an intense look that could only be described as adoration. Will held Mike's glance for a few seconds before he felt the blush pushing up his neck and he was forced to look away - because being looked at like *that* by Mike Wheeler was still just too new. He wasn't able to hide for long though, as a gently cupped hand grasped his chin and turned his face back towards his best friend.

This time it was Will who was on the receiving end of a surprise kiss, as Mike leaned down to gently press their lips together. It was almost achingly soft and tender, neither party in a hurry to retreat. "William Byers, you're amazing," Mike whispered against his lips, not bothering to fully pull away.

The fireworks going off in Will's head were making it difficult to



think. He was just about to stutter out some sort of reply when they were both shocked back to reality.

"BOYS, DINNER IN TEN!" Karen's voice came drifting down the stairs. She was actually nowhere close to the door, but Will and Mike still jumped back from each other as if they'd been burned. After looking around wildly to ascertain they hadn't been caught *already*, Mike yelled back a reply in typical Mike Wheeler fashion.

"OKAY, WE'LL BE UP IN A FEW MINUTES!!"

The boys exchanged a shaky smile as their heartbeats returned to normal. Mike slowly laid his good hand face up on the couch between them, fixing Will with a hopeful glance. Will shyly reached out his own to take it, interlocking their fingers.

"So...did you really mean what you said?" Mike asked nonchalantly, rubbing a thumb along one of Will's fingers.

"Hmmm, which thing?"

"Making sure I wear this necklace every day. That's gonna require a lot of work. You know you basically just signed yourself up to a lifetime of attachment to me, right?" Mike's eyes were dancing with merriment as he gave Will's hand a playful squeeze.

Will huffed a overdramatic sigh of exasperation as he struggled to keep a grin from his own lips. "Well, I guess I'm committed now. I'll just have to get used to having you around, I suppose."

As both boys finally cracked and devolved into giggles, and Will contentedly snuggled himself against Mike, he thought to himself that this was one thing he wouldn't mind getting used to at all.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And there you have it! Hope that was fluffy enough to make up for all the angst I put you through (I've come to realize in the past couple weeks that I may be incapable of writing angstless fluff).

There will most likely be a short epilogue chapter

just to kind of bring things full circle and close up some loose ends, but this fic is by and large finished. It's not perfect nor a masterpiece, but I can say with certainty that I really do like it, and am embarrassingly proud of myself for being able to finish my first multi-chapter work and being able to share it with all of you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for reading, and a special thank you to those of you that left comments and kudos, you helped inspire me to get this thing done! I've got lots more ideas on the way for other fics, so stay tuned. Thanks again!

## 8. Epilogue

### Notes for the Chapter:

Please note this contains a few throwback references to Will's dream sequences at the start of chapter 1. If you need to re-familiarize yourself with it, go ahead and take a quick look. Also note Mike's arm has completely healed, and his cast is off. Okay, that's it, hope you enjoy!

*It was happening - again. The cold, dark, desolate version of Hawkins, Indiana spread out all around him with no form of life anywhere. Well, human life at least. He could already hear the demodogs howling in the distance as he wondered why this kept happening to him. It sounded like they were coming from all directions. He was surrounded, it would only be a matter of time before they closed in with their rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth, and-*

"Will? Will! Please wake up Will!" a voice said its volume low, but its tone urgent. Will's eyes shot open to see Mike's worried face looking down on him as he stood over his bedside.

"Will, are you okay? It sounded like you were having a nightmare," his boyfriend asked.

Boyfriend...it still gave Will little butterflies every time he said that word to himself. In some ways he still couldn't believe it. But it had been a month since they had confessed their feelings for each other that afternoon in the Wheeler basement, and they were *definitely* boyfriends. Endless quick pecks on the lips when no one else was looking, hours of hand holding and cuddling together on couches while watching movies, and a handful of moderately heavy make out sessions had proven that. So yes...this was Will's boyfriend - and he didn't want to ruin it like he did in his dream. Where Mike had had enough. Where Mike had left.

"Will?" Mike prodded gently as Will guiltily realized he still hadn't answered him.

"What? No. I'm fine Mike, really," he replied, trying his best to give a genuine smile. But it must not have been very convincing, because instead of accepting his explanation at face value, Mike just frowned and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Will...why are you lying to me? Have I done something to make you think you can't tell me the truth? About literally anything?"

"What!? Mike, no, of course not," Will rushed to say, reaching out to place his hand on the other boy's. "I...I'm sorry. I guess I just felt guilty for waking you up."

Mike's face relaxed a bit as he flipped his hand over and intertwined his fingers with Will's. "Listen, you didn't wake me up, okay? I was up already. But, even if you *had* woke me up, I wouldn't care. Wake me up every time if you need to. I'll always be there for you."

Will's nose crinkled and he was about to retort something, but then something from Mike's statement struck him. "Wait, why were you awake?"

"Huh?"

"You said you were up already."

"Oh...yeah. I, um, kinda had a nightmare myself. When I woke up you were thrashing around in your bed, so I decided to try to stop yours while it was still in progress."

Shit. Will knew about Mike's nightmares of course. They were to be expected after his experience, but he had hoped that Mike might have an easier time shaking them off than Will did. But it didn't appear that was the case. "Do you....wanna talk about it?"

Mike raised an eyebrow at him, well aware that Will was trying to deflect attention away from himself. "How about...we tell each other? I'll even go first if you want."

Will let out a couple deep breaths before nodding in agreement.

"Well, in mine, it started like normal, with me being captured by those creeps. And then you came to rescue me...only this time it

didn't work," Mike said, his voice starting to get frantic. "Instead they caught you too, and tortured you in all the same ways they did me, and they tied me up and forced me to watch it all, until they finally -"

He broke off with a sharp intake of air and a shake of his head, like he couldn't bear to actually say the rest out loud. Which was fine, Will had adequately gotten the picture. "Hey, hey it's okay Mike. That didn't happen, I'm right here, safe. We both are," he said reassuringly, gently squeezing Mike's hand in his own.

The raven-haired boy took a shaky breath before he nodded. "I know. I know. Still sucked though," he said, tilting his lips in an attempt at a grin. "Alright Byers, your turn."

Will frowned, knowing it wouldn't be anything Mike hadn't heard a million times before. But he had agreed to the deal, he wasn't going to break it. "Mine was dumb. I was just being chased by the demodogs in the Upside Down...again. Luckily you woke me up before they caught me this time though. So, um, thanks."

This time it was Mike's hand doing the squeezing, drawing little circle's on the back of Will's hand with his thumb. "Just because you've had the dream before doesn't make it dumb, Will. That shit is just as scary as mine, if not scarier. But the important thing is...that's not ever going to happen again okay? We won't let it. You belong to this dimension - we're not letting any other one have you."

The smaller boy huffed out a small laugh. "Thanks, Mike."

"No sweat." Mike looked over at the clock on Will's nightstand before continuing. "Still plenty of time before morning. You think you can get back to sleep?"

"Yeah, most likely," Will hummed. "That wasn't even one of the really bad dreams."

Too late Will's mouth snapped shut as he saw Mike frown once more. "If that doesn't qualify as bad...what does, Will?"

Maybe he's tired of hiding the truth from Mike. Maybe he's just plain tired. But for whatever reason he heard himself blurt out the one

dream that hurts the most. "The one where you get tired of all this...of me. Where you leave. Where you...stop loving me."

Out of all possible reactions that Will expected, Mike busting up laughing in his face never crossed his mind.

"H-hey!" he started out indignantly. "Are you *laughing* at me? After I shared something like that with you? I really don't think this is fu-"

The rest of his complaint got lost in Mike's mouth, because Will was suddenly being kissed. And not a chaste kiss offered up as apology. No, this was a deep, passionate, messy kiss, full of unbridled emotion. With hardly any preamble, Mike's tongue was in his mouth searching every nook and cranny, as if the key to all happiness was buried somewhere deep behind Will's molars.

A needy moan escaped Will's throat as he tried futilely to kiss back. But this war was over, and the older boy was thoroughly dominating the kiss, effectively turning Will's brain to mush. By the time they finally broke apart, a small string of saliva connecting their lips for the briefest of moments, both boys were breathing hard. Will's first impulse was to turn away and look elsewhere - but Mike knew this. So he held Will's face in both of his hands gently, keeping their eyes locked together.

"I'm sorry Will, I didn't mean to laugh. But the thought of me leaving you...of not loving you anymore...it was just so ridiculous that my brain had no other reaction to give. Listen to me carefully okay. I've been doing a lot of thinking about my future these past couple of weeks. Apparently almost dying will have that effect on you. But in every single version I dreamed up, you're right there with me, together. I can't envision ever leaving you."

"Mike, you don't know -"

"But," Mike cut in, silencing Will's protest, "even if the unthinkable happens. Even if we're not together...like *this*...I will *never* stop loving you, Will Byers. And I will always be there when you need me. Always. Every single time. Do you understand?"

Will's not sure if it was the kiss, the speech, or the way Mike's eyes

bored into his own, daring him to find something that contradicted what he had just said. But for whatever reason Will found himself nodding, fully believing what the boy in front of him was saying.

"Yeah. I understand," he said leaning forward, pecking Mike on the lips.

"Good," Mike said, letting out a sigh. "Glad that's out of the way."

"I just wish our sleeping selves were as easy to convince," Will said wryly. "Just because we know the nightmares aren't real doesn't mean they won't come back, you know."

Mike looked thoughtful for a moment, as if internally debating something, before apparently coming to a decision. "I have an idea how to fix that too actually."

"Oh yeah? What's that?" Will asked curiously.

"Scoot over," Mike said, grabbing his pillow from its spot on the floor.

A light pink dusting immediately appeared on Will's face at the implication. Even though they were boyfriends now, they still hadn't crossed the line of sleeping in the same bed yet. Mike had been sleeping on the floor in his sleeping bag as always.

Neither boy had been brave enough to offer up the suggestion of sharing a bed, not knowing how comfortable the other would be with it. Plus, there was always the chance that Joyce could walk in unannounced in the morning. And while Will had told her about their relationship (she had been ecstatic, making Will go over the details of the confession and first kiss over and over again until he was a blushing mess), Will didn't know how cool she would be with them sharing a bed now that they were together.

"Y-you wanna sleep with me?" Will asked, immediately flushing an even deeper red at how that had sounded. "I m-meant sleep in the same bed as me!" he squeaked, burying his head in his hands. He peeked through his fingers at his boyfriend who was now sporting his own blush. But Mike just snorted out a laugh.

"Smooth Byers. Real smooth. *Anyways*," Mike said with an exaggerated throat clear, "I thought that maybe if I was close to you...if I *knew* you were there...it might stop the nightmares from coming. But, if you're not comfortable -"

"No! I mean...no. It's fine," Will said, shyly moving over to make room.

A fluttering sensation erupted in his stomach as Mike crawled under the covers, his lanky limbs knocking into Will's own in the confines of the small bed. They're both wearing a t-shirt and shorts, but when their lower legs tangle together, it's nothing but skin on skin. Will felt his breath hitch as Mike snaked an arm around his torso, pulling him closer.

"So neither of us fall off," Mike explained hurriedly.

"R-right," Will replied. He was sure this was going to be awkward and nerve-wracking and neither of them would get a wink of sleep. But as he laid there, Mike's chest pressed firmly into his back, his warm breath traveling in waves down Will's neck, he realized it was none of those things. He felt none of the apprehension he usually does before bedtime. He was no longer worried about what might come during the night, or what monsters would haunt his dreams. He just felt....safe.

Mike was obviously feeling similarly relaxed because his next words were heavily coated with sleepiness already. "Good night, Will. 'Love you," he said, placing a kiss on the back of Will's head.

"I love you too, Mike," Will said softly, snuggling back even further into the embrace. "I love you too."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And there you have it, this story is now complete! Thank you all so much for reading and for all of your thoughts in the comments. They really mean a lot to me.

For those of you following along with my other Byler



fic, please don't shoot me, I swear I'm working on the next chapter! I had to get this one wrapped up though. But that's my next priority for sure!

For those that liked this story and aren't yet reading my other Byler work, "Will Byers has a...Girlfriend?!", go give it a read. Though as of now it did leave off at a rather nasty cliffhanger.

Anyways, thanks all again for reading, and stay tuned for more from me. Lots of ideas to come!